



WHITEPAPER

Should you use an accessibility overlay tool?



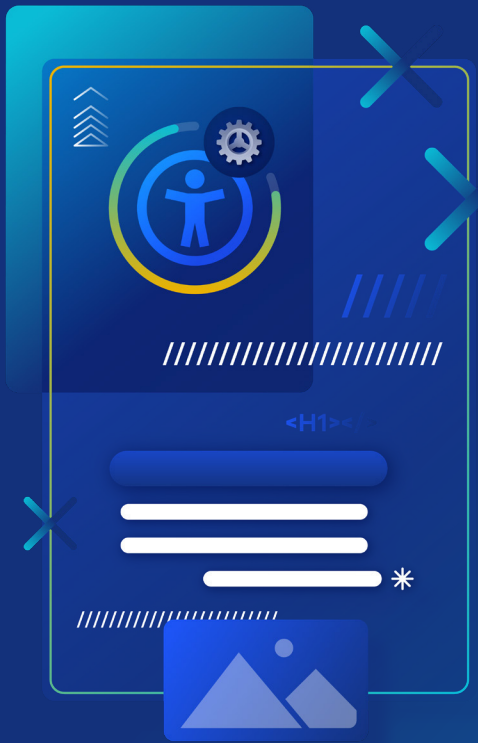
Many organizations are seeking quick, low-cost accessibility compliance solutions to avoid litigation and ensure their website is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 508. And there are many vendors out there that promise to provide one-click compliance with accessibility overlay tools. Sound too good to be true? That's because it probably is.

Let's take a detailed dive into the drawbacks of using an accessibility overlay tool, and why this approach to accessibility is inherently flawed.

What are accessibility overlay tools?

Accessibility overlay tools are automated software solutions that claim to detect and fix web accessibility issues. Overlay tools work by modifying the code of a web page with a snippet of JavaScript – and promise to ensure your website's accessibility.

It sounds appealingly simple. Just insert a code, and your website will be 100% accessible. But overlay tools are no silver bullet for web accessibility. In practice, these tools are limited in scope and don't constitute a full compliance solution.



Common problems with accessibility overlay tools

There are some simple accessibility issues that overlay tools can identify and resolve, but there are also many other problems they can't fix properly – or at all.

There is simply too much complexity in the WCAG guidelines for overlay tools to provide the robust modification needed to make your website accessible. While some of these tools use basic artificial intelligence (AI) to run their checks, they're too immature to interpret the guidelines in a meaningful way, leaving big accessibility gaps across your website.

So, what issues are ignored by accessibility overlay tools?

- Missing headings or headings not being properly coded
- Missing alt text on images
- Link text marked clearly
- No labels on form fields
- Required form fields not indicated
- No submit button on form/no clear submit button label

Worryingly, most of these issues are a significant barrier to web users with disabilities – the very users you are trying to include.

What about accessibility issues that can only be detected manually?

We've looked at accessibility issues that can be detected by automated tools, but what about issues that are only determinable by manual checks?

It's estimated that 50% to 60% of all accessibility issues require manual verification. Unfortunately, overlay solutions lack manual testing and remediation. This further lowers the capabilities of such tools and casts considerable doubt on the claims of 100% accessibility compliance touted by some overlay tool vendors.

Security vulnerabilities

You've probably heard that it takes years to build a digital reputation, but only one security incident to destroy it. Since overlay tools work by inserting third-party JavaScript into your pages, it's important to consider the potential security issues that can arise from using these scripts on your website.

Pertinent security issues to think about include:

- Does the overlay vendor have a robust enough infrastructure to ensure that the script is loaded on every page request?
- Can they handle the amount of traffic for all their customers?
- How secure is your vendor's server?
- Will the vendor report any security breaches or vulnerabilities?
- Is the vendor constantly monitoring and upgrading their product's security?
- What are the repercussions of a security breach?



Diminished performance

Overlay tools can also diminish the performance of your website. How much speed are you willing to give up if your overlay tool is resource intensive?

It's important here to know that [Google uses website speed as a ranking factor](#). Note that 40% of visitors will leave a page after waiting for more than three seconds – your visitors are unlikely to be understanding of a slower site experience, which can cost your serious business.

Blocked by ad blockers

Extensions designed to block ads are known to block overlays, meaning no remediation will be applied to the page when its viewed through an ad blocker. This problem is compounded by the fact that ad blockers are a common way for assistive technology users to block content that contributes to a poor user experience.

Custom overlays

But what about custom overlays? Tailor-made overlays promise to address the shortcomings of your publishing system better than generic overlay tools and are specific to your site's code. But they too have serious disadvantages.

As well as being expensive and labor intensive to build and maintain, these solutions lack flexibility and can break during regular site maintenance – one small change on your website has the potential to disrupt the whole overlay. While a custom solution may work in the short-term, they don't address the root of the problem – the base code of your website.



Why accessibility toolbars aren't the answer

Toolbars are sometimes used as, or in conjunction with, an overlay tool. Accessibility toolbars are a feature added to your website that enable customization with particular accessibility functions – such as those found in browser or device settings. They are displayed prominently on your website via a toolbar or modal. The functionality may even be like what's offered by a user's existing assistive technology. And there lies in the problem.

Overlays attempt to replace the functionality of their own devices. But users relying on assistive technology tools or customization already have their devices and browsers configured to their desired settings. They're unlikely to go through the effort of configuring a single site and overriding their current device settings. After all, the settings can't follow them to the next site, or the site after that. Forcibly overriding their preferences won't generate goodwill – or return visits.

What about alternate “accessible” websites?

The focus here has been on the drawbacks of overlay tools, but the question will inevitably come up, “why not just make a separate, accessible website?” There are two compelling reasons why you should never consider this approach.

- 1 Doubled maintenance costs and effort.** There are the up-front costs of setting up a second site, as well as further maintenances costs. Over time, these costs can exceed the cost of making your original site accessible in the first place.
- 2 Separate doesn’t mean equal – or inclusive.** It’s common to reduce the functionality of the ‘accessible’ version of a website to make it accessible, which fundamentally goes against the intent of the ADA and the wishes of people with disabilities – that is, a full and equal experience for all. Additionally, your primary website will still be exposed to legal risk. In 2018, the US Department of Transport ruled that Scandinavian Airlines’ separate ‘accessible’ website violated the department’s accessibility requirements, leading to a [\\$200,000 fine](#).



Lawsuits

Many businesses turn to overlay tools to avoid getting sued under the ADA. Unfortunately, relying on an overlay tool can actually increase legal risk if it doesn’t solve all the accessibility issues on your site. According to [Accessibility Defense in this post from March 31, 2020](#):

“**In the last two weeks alone five lawsuits have been filed against businesses that use an accessibility widget or overlay on their websites.**”

Conclusion: if the overlay does not fix the issue detected by the complainant, it won’t prevent a lawsuit.

What happens when you cancel your contract?

As the overlay is ‘turned on’, it is only effective while active. When your organization ends its relationship with the overlay vendor, the tool is then ‘turned off’. Suddenly, all your original base code issues are back – with all the legal implications.

Wouldn’t it be better to address that code base from the start?

How Siteimprove can help

It's clear that overlay tools provide a false sense of security for organizations striving to comply with accessibility regulations. Using these tools is no guarantee of accessibility and may even increase legal risk. Unfortunately, decision-makers don't always have the technical knowledge to know if their chosen tool can effectively tackle the demands of web accessibility.

So, what can you do to address your accessibility issues properly and stay on the right side of the law? Work with an experienced accessibility partner with expertise in training and remediation to make comprehensive, long-term changes.

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