

# SKILLS ECONOMY TOOLKIT

## ACTION GUIDE: ENSURING ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL WORKERS

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### Introduction

A skills-based economy only succeeds when everyone can participate fully. Yet too often, skills systems, especially technology-supported skills systems, create barriers for people with disabilities, limited digital access, language differences, or other accessibility challenges.

*True skills transparency requires accessibility transparency. That is ensuring that everyone can discover, demonstrate, and deploy their skills.*

This guide will help you design and implement accessible skills systems that work for all members of your community, meeting legal requirements while expanding opportunity.

### Why Accessibility Matters

A skills economy promises to expand opportunity by recognizing what people can do, regardless of where they learned it. Yet, if the infrastructure required to prove those skills, such as digital platforms, badge wallets, and online portfolios, excludes people without reliable internet, smartphones, or digital literacy, you've simply replaced one barrier with another.

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*Accessibility isn't an add-on; it's foundational to whether skills-based and skills-first approaches actually deliver on equity.*

- **Workers with disabilities** need platforms that are accessible to screen readers and other assistive technologies.
- **Immigrants and English language learners** need multilingual interfaces and support.
- **Adults with developing digital skills** need simple, intuitive systems that don't require technical expertise.
- **Rural workers** need solutions that function on low bandwidth.
- **Low-income workers** need free or low-cost access to credentialing platforms.

When skills infrastructure is inaccessible, the very populations who could benefit most, those with non-degrees credentials and experiences, who are trying to prove their capabilities, get locked out. You've built a highway that only some people can use.

Boards must design for accessibility from the start, not retrofit it later. This means choosing technology platforms with strong accessibility features, providing multiple pathways to earn and share credentials (digital and paper), offering in-person support for workers who need help navigating systems, ensuring materials are available in multiple languages, and partnering with community organizations that serve populations facing access barriers.

It also means measuring who's actually using your skills infrastructure and who's not. If your digital badge program only serves tech-savvy workers with smartphones and college degrees, it's not expanding opportunity.

Accessibility isn't just about compliance with ADA requirements; it's about whether your skills economy works for everyone or just replicates existing privilege. The test of success isn't how elegant your technology is; it's whether the single mother working two jobs without home internet can earn, store, and share verified credentials as easily as someone with a laptop and unlimited data.


*In this action guide, we explore common accessibility barriers people face in a skills economy and provide steps and tools to mitigate them.*

# Step 1: Understand Common Accessibility Barriers

Before you can remove barriers, you need to understand them. Skills systems can create obstacles across multiple dimensions of accessibility.

## Types of Accessibility Barriers

Barrier Type	Common Issues	Impact on Skills Systems
<b>Visual</b>	Blindness, low vision, color blindness	Can't use platforms without screen reader support, credential badges not described, skills assessments rely on visuals
<b>Hearing</b>	Deafness, hard of hearing	Training videos without captions, phone-only support lines, webinars without transcripts
<b>Mobility</b>	Limited use of hands, wheelchair users	Platforms require a mouse, timed assessments, and training facilities not physically accessible
<b>Cognitive</b>	Learning disabilities, memory challenges, attention differences	Complex navigation, jargon-heavy content, overwhelming interfaces, and no alternative assessment formats
<b>Digital Access</b>	Limited internet, no computer, low digital literacy	Digital-only credential wallets, online-only services, and no mobile optimization
<b>Language</b>	Limited English proficiency, different primary language	English-only platforms, credentials not translated, cultural assumptions in assessments


 **Action Item:** Use the Accessibility Barrier Assessment (Tool 1) to identify obstacles in your current systems.

## Step 2: Apply Universal Design Principles

Universal Design means building systems that work for everyone from the start, rather than retrofitting accessibility later. These principles apply to digital platforms, physical spaces, training programs, and assessment processes.

### Seven Principles of Universal Design

Principle	How to Apply in Skills Systems
<b>Equitable Use</b>	Provide the same means of use for all: credential wallets work with screen readers, training is available in multiple formats, and assessment accommodations are built in
<b>Flexibility in Use</b>	Accommodate preferences and abilities: keyboard navigation AND mouse, video AND text transcripts, self-paced AND cohort learning
<b>Simple and Intuitive</b>	Easy to understand regardless of experience: clear navigation, plain language, consistent patterns, progressive disclosure of complexity
<b>Perceptible Information</b>	Communicate effectively to all senses: alt text for images, captions for videos, text AND visual indicators, sufficient color contrast
<b>Tolerance for Error</b>	Minimize hazards and errors: auto-save, undo options, clear error messages, confirmation prompts, no data loss from mistakes
<b>Low Physical Effort</b>	Efficient and comfortable use: voice input options, single sign-on, pre-populated forms, minimal repetitive actions
<b>Size and Space</b>	Appropriate size regardless of body: touch targets at least 44x44 pixels, readable text at all zoom levels, responsive design for all devices

 **Action Item:** Use the Universal Design Checklist (Tool 2) to evaluate your systems against these principles.

## Step 3: Meet Digital Accessibility Standards

Digital platforms are central to modern skills systems. Meeting WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) standards isn't just good practice; it's often legally required.

### WCAG 2.1 Level AA Requirements

Level AA is the standard required by most laws and policies. Here are the key requirements for skills platforms:

Category	Requirements	Testing Methods
<b>Perceivable</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Alt text for images</li><li>● Captions for videos</li><li>● 4.5:1 color contrast</li><li>● No info by color alone</li></ul>	Automated scanners (WAVE, axe), screen reader testing, contrast checkers
<b>Operable</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Keyboard accessible</li><li>● No keyboard traps</li><li>● Skip navigation links</li><li>● Adjustable time limits</li></ul>	Tab through the interface, check focus indicators, test with keyboard only
<b>Understandable</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Readable text (reading level)</li><li>● Predictable behavior</li><li>● Clear error messages</li><li>● Help available</li></ul>	Readability checkers, user testing with diverse audiences
<b>Robust</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Valid HTML</li><li>● Proper ARIA labels</li><li>● Works with assistive tech</li><li>● Compatible with tools</li></ul>	HTML validators, test with JAWS, NVDA, VoiceOver

 **Action Item:** Use the WCAG Compliance Checklist (Tool 3) to audit your digital platforms.

## Step 4: Provide Reasonable Accommodations

Even with an accessible design, some individuals will need specific accommodations. Have clear processes for requesting and providing accommodations for assessments, training, and credential verification.

### Common Accommodations in Skills Systems

Context	Examples of Accommodations
<b>Skills Assessments</b>	Extended time (typically 1.5x or 2x), separate quiet room, screen reader compatibility, alternative formats (oral instead of written), breaks as needed, scribe for written responses
<b>Training Programs</b>	ASL interpreters, CART (real-time captioning), materials in advance, alternative assignments, flexible attendance, assistive technology, note-taking support
<b>Credential Verification</b>	Alternative evidence of competency, portfolio instead of test, demonstration instead of written, video recording of skills, third-party verification
<b>Workforce Center Services</b>	Wheelchair-accessible facilities, TTY/video relay service, documents in large print or braille, simplified forms, language interpretation, transportation support

### Accommodation Request Process

- **Make it Easy to Request:** Simple form, multiple contact methods, no medical documentation required unless necessary
- **Respond Quickly:** Within 3-5 business days, ideally sooner
- **Engage in an interactive process:** Discuss what would work, explore options together
- **Document the Accommodation:** Put it in writing so everyone knows what to expect
- **Follow Up:** Check that accommodation is working, adjust as needed

● **Action Item:** Use the Accommodation Request Template (Tool 4) to create your process.

# Accessibility Tools & Templates

Use these tools to assess, design, and maintain accessible skills systems.

## TOOL 1: Accessibility Barrier Assessment

Identify barriers in your current systems.

Potential Barrier	Present?	Priority
Website not compatible with screen readers	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Videos lack captions or transcripts	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Forms require mouse interaction	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Insufficient color contrast	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Timed assessments with no extensions available	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Training materials only in English	<input type="checkbox"/>	
No alternative to digital-only services	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Complex jargon without a plain language option	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Physical facilities are not wheelchair accessible	<input type="checkbox"/>	
No process for requesting accommodations	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Credential badges lack descriptive text	<input type="checkbox"/>	
The job matching platform is not keyboard navigable	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Training is only offered in person (no remote option)	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Assessment formats are inflexible (one-way only)	<input type="checkbox"/>	

**Priority:** High (fix within 30 days) | Medium (fix within 90 days) | Low (fix within 6 months)

## TOOL 2: Universal Design Checklist

Evaluate systems against universal design principles.

Universal Design Element	Present?
Same functionality available to all people using the system (no separate 'accessible' version)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Multiple ways to access content (keyboard, mouse, voice, touch)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consistent navigation and interaction patterns	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clear, simple language without unnecessary jargon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information conveyed through multiple senses (visual + audio + text)	<input type="checkbox"/>
High contrast and readable fonts	<input type="checkbox"/>
Undo, back, and cancel options are available	<input type="checkbox"/>
Auto-save to prevent data loss	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keyboard shortcuts for frequent actions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Single sign-on to reduce repeated authentication	<input type="checkbox"/>
Touch targets at least 44x44 pixels	<input type="checkbox"/>
Responsive design works on all screen sizes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Content reflows at 400% zoom without horizontal scrolling	<input type="checkbox"/>

## TOOL 3: WCAG 2.1 Level AA Compliance Checklist

Quick audit of key accessibility requirements.

WCAG Requirement	Passes?
All images have descriptive alt text	<input type="checkbox"/>
Videos have accurate captions	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio content has text transcripts	<input type="checkbox"/>
Text has 4.5:1 contrast ratio (3:1 for large text)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Information not conveyed by color alone	<input type="checkbox"/>
All functionality is available via keyboard	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keyboard focus is visible	<input type="checkbox"/>
No keyboard traps	<input type="checkbox"/>
Skip navigation link provided	<input type="checkbox"/>
Page titles are descriptive	<input type="checkbox"/>
Link text makes sense out of context	<input type="checkbox"/>
Forms have clear labels	<input type="checkbox"/>
Error messages are clear and helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>
Content is organized with headings	<input type="checkbox"/>
HTML validates correctly	<input type="checkbox"/>
ARIA labels used appropriately	<input type="checkbox"/>



## Next Steps

Building accessible skills systems is an ongoing commitment. Here's how to get started:

- **Assess current barriers** using the audit tools
- **Prioritize fixes** based on impact and legal requirements
- **Apply universal design** to new systems from the start
- **Establish an accommodation process** and train staff
- **Test with real users**, including people with disabilities
- **Monitor and improve** continuously

## Additional Resources

- **ADA.gov:** [Official ADA resources and guidance](#)
- **WCAG 2.1:** [w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref](https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref)
- **WebAIM:** [Free accessibility evaluation tools](#)
- **Section 508:** [section508.gov for federal requirements](https://www.section508.gov)
- **Action Guide:** The Role of Technology in Skills Work

*Questions or feedback?*

*Contact the National Association of Workforce Boards*

[www.nawb.org](https://www.nawb.org)