

Article 19 - Accessibility with Kara Gaulrapp

Hosted by: Marty Molloy, Kristen Witucki

Guests: Kara Gaulrapp

Narrator:

Expression is one of the most powerful tools we have. A voice, a pen, a keyboard. The real change which must give to people throughout the world their human rights must come about in the hearts of people. We must want our fellow human beings to have rights and freedoms which give them dignity. Article 19 is the voice in the room.

Kristen:

Welcome back to Article 19. I'm Kristen Witucki. I'm the A11Y Specialist at Tamman, and I'm also joined by my co-host, Marty Molloy, President of Tamman. Hey, Marty, how's it going?

Marty:

Ah, good, Kristen. Thank you so much.

Kristen:

We are also joined by Kara Gaulrapp. And Kara is the Senior Accessibility Analyst at the University of Pennsylvania. Hi, Kara. We're so happy to have you today.

Kara:

Hi there. Thanks for having me. Excited to be here too.

Kristen:

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got started in the digital accessibility field?

Kara:

So like many accessibility professionals and IT professionals in general, I did not take a direct route to working in accessibility. In the early nineties, my family actually owned a computer sales company. And I have a very core memory of when I was the child of getting my first desktop computer installed in the home. I had two things, AOL and Doom. So I have had pretty much unsupervised access to the internet. since I was five years old. And since I was unleashed on that Wild West of the World Wide Web at that point, I was just always obsessed with creating things, tinkering things. So I always was creating, whether it was GeoCities layouts and websites, eventually MySpace and creating my own websites at some point. I've just always been looking at how I can use technology to build things. And eventually that led me into one of my passions, which is accessibility. Previous to getting into higher education and all that, I was primarily working in various creative and development type roles. usually in the ed tech startup space, you know, as well as other higher education clients and, you know, nonprofit clients as well. But whether I was hired as a developer or hired as a, like a graphic designer, as I usually was like hired to do one thing and then always ended up working on, you know, a bunch of, you know, other types of tasks. So through all of these different types of roles that I have, I found where my kind of sweet spot is, is that I like teaching people. But I, you know, didn't ever want to be a teacher. I liked helping people, but I didn't ever want to be a doctor. So how can I kind of carve out my little, you know, space in this technology world for myself here? I think kind of where the big pivot in my professional career happened was when I was working for a ed tech startup company that focused on developing digital literacy skills for students with disabilities. And that introduced me into a lot of different topics and areas that I really didn't have a lot of understanding in. Because even though I was on the internet and using websites since I was five years old, and I have what I would call a, you know, a very strong sense of digital literacy, not everybody has that, right? You know, certain people, you know, don't know that when you send an email to somebody, somebody doesn't get that right away. They

get an alert for it and then they get the email, but they may not respond quite like a text message. So starting to like build up those types of skills. And when I started kind of like thinking about how other people interact with these same tools that I use, you know, it really did lead me down a path of when I eventually became a lead front-end developer, I started to think about how we are organizing our content. How are we making things easier for just people to digest this type of information? So when I eventually came here to Penn, it was a great combination of all of the things that I liked about my previous roles and they gave me the type of freedom to help build out a larger program for the different school centers and departments here at Penn. Here, I do everything from, you know, training and website auditing to helping people in procurement, making sure that we're buying accessible technology, but also working, you know, directly with staff members who maybe they are in charge of running their website, but they actually don't have any type of technical background. So, you know, how do we help build that type of, you know, capacity and things like that as well for, you know, about me, but I may want to go back and add something at some point if that's okay.

Marty:

I 100% want to leave in what you just said there in terms of adding more, because I think that that's great. I love when this becomes just sort of an amazing journey and conversation. So when you got to Penn, I have a specific question around, you said prior to Penn, you were a lead front-end developer. Do you find that in terms of the very specific place where you're situated, do you think that that technical background is really, really important and critical? Or does that just happen to be like an added feature that you bring to the table? Like in some distant future, when you have someone who's filling the role that you're in now, would you think it's really important that they be a developer?

Kara:

I would say that while it's not important to be a developer, it is important to have a deep understanding of how technology works. It makes your job a lot easier if you know what to look for. So for example, anyone can run Wave on a website and anyone can see the issues and the alerts that get flagged. But actually knowing why it's not working or the things that you need to have in order to have something work. I think that is what's important. You don't need to know how to write code, but you do need to know how to evaluate code. You don't have to know how to code a form, but you do need to know that form elements need labels. How do those labels get tied to those form elements? So having that type of technical literacy is important. And that is something that I absolutely would want, you know, in somebody.

Kristen:

Well, it's amazing knowing those things. You can help people to make a mind shift, I think, instead of just like putting out fires. You can say, well, here's how you could avoid some of this trouble in the first place and actually think of people with disabilities as equal players, basically, on the team and important contributors. So that's really cool. What are you most proud of at Penn in terms of digital accessibility since you've arrived?

Kara:

I would say that there's two parts to that. So the first one is definitely the community and awareness building. Granted, when I came into this role, there was already a bit of a presence on campus about people who were interested in accessibility and they knew that it was something that they need to be doing. So, but when I came in, we were able to formalize that. So now we have a whole website, we have processes, we have standards, right? That somebody now can go to on the web if they don't know where they need to start with accessibility. And now we have resources to connect people. One of the things that I'm also really proud about is being able to connect people, right? Because you're dealing with lots of different types of people, different types of departments, different budgets, different types of capacity. Being able to, you know, meet

somebody like where they are and understanding the issues that they're going through and then connecting them with the proper resources or delivering them a training in a way that's going to be most beneficial to them. I am very proud of, you know, being able to have a program that's flexible enough that, you know, we're not forcing people down, you know, one rigid path towards like compliance, right. You know, that's just not going to work out for anybody, but, you know, obviously we're still reactive to lots of things, but, you know, being able to, you know, kind of work in more of an agile framework helps us be more proactive with people. I would say on the other side, another thing that was very important for us to do is to get a handle on what we're working with, right? Kind of what's our baseline of accessibility. So prior to me coming, we didn't have a way to measure at an enterprise level, what our websites and our web applications, where they even stood WCAG 2.0 at that point. So, what we do now is we contract with Pope Tech for their enterprise accessibility monitoring software. And now we have a way for us to at least get some metrics and baselines, you know, around those types of statistics. You know, while we're not tracking absolutely every single website, because I still find websites out in the wild, you know, each week we're at least able to have oversight into, you know, a majority of our high profile websites, which we didn't have before.

Kristen:

I love that websites in the wild thing. You're like, wait, where did this one come from? Like, what? They don't have headings. They don't have labels. It's great. It's reaching a new group of people every day. It's awesome.

Kara:

And especially to you, Penn has a very large presence, right? And unfortunately for me, not all of our websites are, you know, something.upenn.edu. We have plenty of organizations and centers that, you know, don't fall under that upenn.edu namespace. And I think that those websites, you know, and that's a challenge. I think that a lot, if not all higher education institutions face, right, is, you know, how are we tracking all these? How do we have a list of all of these websites? How do we, you know, make sure that, you know, professors who go rogue and just spin up websites for their courses, you know, how do we still have insight into those? So, you know, that's always going to be a challenge with any large organization is, you know, making sure that we have all of our domains covered, which at this point in time, I would say that, you know, we're mostly there. But again, we're always finding some have always slipped through the cracks, and they will continue to do so.

Kristen:

Yeah, of course. So, High Road is such a unique time for students because, you know, they come from secondary where they're super often super sheltered. You know, we want them to try and learn and do as much as they can and learn from their mistakes. But ultimately, the goal is for them to do well, go to college, and make their IEP goals. And they're under IDEA, which is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. So there are a lot of rules about what has to be handled by teachers versus the student. And so when they get to college, they're out on their own for the first time. Their protections are there, but they've shifted to ADA, and it's a lot more student-centered, even than people in secondary ed are able to be. And so I'm curious, from the institutional side, and just kind of your general thoughts about higher ed, what are some of the biggest challenges that you have with this unique time for people?

Kara:

On the student side of things, one thing, too, that people need to keep in mind is that not every student who has a disability is going to identify as having a disability, right? So if somebody has a need, they can go to our student disability services, they can request accommodations, and we have a whole process for that. Where a challenge is that, well, what if that student either one doesn't know that they have a disability or two chooses not to disclose that. So, you know, now they are going on all of our web properties, going through courses, and, you know, maybe they have

needs that should be supported, but we don't know about those. So a challenge is, you know, just when somebody is putting together, whether it's their course content or they're putting together a website and nobody's alerted to them that they may have a user who requires a certain accommodation, they may not be thinking about accessibility. So again, that kind of goes back to that like proactive versus reactive mindset. Another huge challenge too is kind of balancing that like compliance with user experience, right? Penn is highly decentralized. Different groups have very different budgets, very different resources. Some of our schools and centers don't have their own internal IT teams. Some do. So, when you're approaching a web project, you know, they can be wildly different from one to the next. So, some organizations may just be able to commit to, we can make things compliant, but, you know, kind of beyond that, you know, we can't really focus too much on putting in the hours to making this a better user experience. I've also found that it can be very challenging the first time that somebody goes through a process, for instance, and that could be on the student side of things or on the faculty side of things. On the faculty side, maybe this is your first time that you have a student who is blind, right? And, you know, now you have to go through all of your course content and you can feel very overwhelming. You know, there's so much to do. Where do I start? That's always going to be a huge issue, which is why it's very important to make sure that, you know, if you do have a central accessibility resource, they are highly visible, that it is very easy to contact them. You know who to contact. And then that person too, you know, you can go to them with any type of question. I always tell people, I'm like, no question is too big or too small for me. It may seem like a lot for you, but I get these questions every single day. So you always want to meet people where they are and you don't want to make people feel dumb for not knowing, you know, what an alt tag is or, you know, how to properly structure a webpage, like These are new skills for a lot of different types of people, and that's always going to be a challenge.

Marty:

You mentioned awareness building, and we're kind of talking about awareness building even in general now as a point of pride. And I think out in the wild, outside of higher ed, and certainly something that Tamman runs into, is when someone is introduced to digital accessibility or just the need for more accessibility, we find people don't react like, oh, no, that's awful. It's always like, oh, gosh, gosh, I wish I knew more. And how can I know more? But I feel like with the noise that exists, and certainly for college students, there's a lot of other noise in their lives. How do we as just a digital accessibility industry, How do you think we can better build awareness that its importance is necessary for some, but beneficial for all? How do we do a better job of getting that overall message of awareness out? And if there's lessons from higher ed, I'd love to hear them. I mean, whatever you got.

Kara:

So Kat Holmes, she has this phenomenal book called Mismatch. And one of the things that she explains in her book, and I think is one of the most excellent ways I've ever heard of phrasing this, is I really focus on kind of that exclusion part of it, where, like, when we start talking about what is it to be, like, inclusive, and we have a bunch of DE&I initiatives, like, you know, inclusive, I think, is inherently a kind of very general word, and it's going to mean different things to different people. But when you say exclusion, at some point in your life, you likely know what it's like to feel excluded. You know, if I say, like, tell me about a time you felt included, a few different things might come to mind. But when you kind of focus on that exclusion part of it, I think that kind of makes it a little bit more real for people. Another thing too, that I think it's kind of like a good way to phrase things to people too. Okay. Imagine you're going on a website and when you go to the website and it takes like, you know, let's say like five to 10 seconds for it to load and you're bouncing around and that's just a super annoying process. You're like, I just want to, you know, look up this piece of information or just buy something. It just takes forever. Pages really load. And now imagine that if somebody else is like, you know, going to access a website and it's inaccessible, you are now wasting people's time. So it's like, you know, remember when you were just really annoyed when it was taking like 10 seconds for a page to load? Well, think about it from a screen reader's point of view where now

they have to take, you know, 10 minutes to figure out your site architecture and you're putting that burden, you know, on people. And that's one thing that you always want to reinforce people. Like the burden should never be on the user to figure out how to work within your digital space. Whatever we can do to make that a better experience for people, like we just need to be proactive about that. But, you know, kind of more to, you know, what you were saying is, you know, once you kind of tell people about accessibility and the ways that they can directly increase the accessibility of their technology. Very rarely have I ever gotten a, "Oh no, I'm not doing that." Or, "Oh, I'm not touching that." Or "I don't care." Like I can count the times on like one hand or maybe even two fingers, like the amount of times I've gotten an "I don't care." So it's not necessarily a hard case to make. What I find is, you know, kind of the challenges, finding the resources, finding the bandwidth. And a lot of people will want to jump right in and be like, "Oh, these are all the things that I want to do." All of those things take time, especially in higher education.

Kristen:

Yeah, it definitely seems like people mostly just don't know rather than not caring. That's right.

Marty:

Yeah, totally. And that counterintuitive, I love that counterintuitive idea of focusing in a little bit on the exclusion. You're absolutely right. I mean, even as you were talking, I was like, I remember that time. It's visceral then, and I think that can help with empathy. You know, Kristen, I couldn't help but to do a little log rolling for Tamman here, but you were part of, I guess, I think Harper led our monthly book talk earlier in the year on Kat Holmes' Mismatch. Am I right?

Kristen:

Yeah, we, we did Mismatch by Kat Holmes. And I think it really resonated with a lot of the people at Tamman who work as developers or client services and all kinds of parts of our puzzle. And I think that was a very popular well attended book talk. So I mean, Kat Holmes could be a great person to revisit next year for sure.

Marty:

Shout out to Harper.

Kristen:

Yes. Thank you Harper. We'll link to that Mismatch podcast in the show notes. For sure. What are your favorite accessibility tools and resources when you're helping people help everything to be more accessible?

Kara:

So I'll absolutely give a plug to our vendor PopeTech. And even calling them a vendor, you know, I don't feel like it's necessarily fair because they truly are more of a partner for us. With PopeTech, they obviously give us our web accessibility monitoring platform, and that tool is just fantastic. But they are also just phenomenal people to work with, and the level of support, too, that they give us is phenomenal. Very rarely do I go like three hours from submitting something without a response, and I think especially in accessibility, that's so important. People do need that type of support. Having a partner that, you know, we can rely on that is always ready to help always ready to build out new features or, you know, explore how they can help better support our institution. You know, I can't say enough good things about PopeTech in general. I also largely rely on my in-person network. One of the things that I love about the accessibility industry is that we are highly collaborative and very big on resource sharing because a lot of us have, you know, had to carve our own way through this. And for a while, there wasn't a lot of great accessibility resources. And you don't know, you know, didn't even know where to start. Like, oh, I want to get into accessibility, you know, kind of, where do I even go? So I absolutely love the WebA11Y Slack. That is always been a go-to that I always recommend to people because it is very active and they have a Slack channel for

every single accessibility topic you could ever imagine. Also a huge fan of the A11Y weekly newsletter. It is the only newsletter I'm actually excited to get, and I don't send straight to my junk mailbox. And then, you know, again, my in-person network. Fortunately, being in a higher education institution, we have an organizational membership to EDUCAUSE, as well as what we call our Ivy Plus groups. So I meet monthly with the other Me's and other higher education and Ivy League universities. And because we all go through the same stuff, you know, a lot of times we're working with the same technologies, working with the same vendors, having the same types of issues. And so this is a way for us to, you know, lean on each other and the other things that we've built or learned. And so we can all move forward together.

Kristen:

Well, those are really cool tools and resources. We'll definitely link to anything that is shareable in our show notes so we can share that with the larger community.

Marty:

I had never heard of the A11Y, I know this is a total embarrassment, I feel like now looking at it, A11Y weekly newsletter.

Kristen:

No, I've never heard of that either.

Marty:

And I'm just looking back at the archive and I'm like, I want to read that. I want to read that. I want to read that. Oh, my golly. Oh, my golly. And so we'll put it up in show notes. That's fantastic.

Kristen:

We'll let people at Tamman know this and sign up for it. That's terrific. Thank you. What advice would you give to departments or people who are just starting to prioritize digital accessibility? And what are some of those early steps they need to take?

Kara:

I think the first step that people need to take is with their mindset, right? I think a lot of times people get very overwhelmed once they have to start thinking about accessibility and how to a lot of times retrofit what they already have. And that can really be scary to a lot of people. So shifting your mindset to a progress over perfection type of thinking, I think definitely helps people along in that process. When I talk to different departments, I say that, you know, first let's figure out what we can do. Let's figure out what our Achilles heel is and what we can tackle first to make immediate impact. Sometimes that's making a change on one template file in your menu system and then magically all of your webpages are a little bit more accessible because people can now access your dropdowns via keyboard, right? Some things take a lot more time and a lot more planning. Higher education in general, we love our PDFs and our documents. As much as me, a millennial, I cannot tell you how much I hate PDFs and documents, but it is a reality and they are here to stay. That's a huge pain point for people. It's like, how do I go back through 15, 20 years of PDFs, prioritize all of this, you know, where do I go from here? So a, you know, kind of like your, I would say a really good first step is just talk to somebody. If you know that your organization has an accessibility professional or a team, reach out to them, you know, and start that conversation. And they should be able to give you a pretty good idea of, you know, kind of what your hurdles are going to be, you know, potentially where you may need to request additional bandwidth or resources or finances, something like that, you know, in order for you to get compliant or, you know, to increase the accessibility. But, you know, again, it really does go back to mindset, I think is the, you know, most important thing is, you know, don't get overwhelmed. Other people have been through this too, and you'll find a path forward, but, you know, just like everything, it's going to be highly dependent on, you know, what you have, whether in terms of your technology or your budget and your resources. But, you know,

just being able to talk to somebody a lot of times can, you know, help alleviate those types of fears and can help give you a project plan and a path forward. Absolutely.

Kristen:

The mindset is so, so critical for making any changes. So we love that and we always strive for that every day. And actually document remediation is a big area that we are releasing more resources in. Do you have any specific advice that you feel like you give people when they start to remediate documents? Because that's actually a huge area for us too.

Kara:

Yeah, absolutely. So the first thing that I ask is, does it need to be a document? Certain things, they absolutely do need to live in document format, but certain things, they will perform way better as web content. But if something absolutely has to be a document, I always recommend start in the source file, or if you're always working from a template, nail that one down, make sure that one is in great shape. So that way, every time you make a new document moving forward, you know, you don't have to worry about that specific one.

Kristen:

Yeah, that's great. Just to think of documents or your process as more global instead of individual documents.

Marty:

Just so the audience can hear it, I was giving you big time snaps on that answer, which was fantastic.

Kristen:

At the end of our podcasts, we always like to ask a few fun questions. So are you ready? Are you ready for fun questions?

Kara:

Yeah, sure. Lay them on me.

Kristen:

So which person, either living or deceased, do you admire most and why?

Kara:

So I would say the living person that I admire the most is definitely my father. And I try to model a lot of what he's done and his mindset in life, you know, with what I do. He never made me feel bad about changing gears or, you know, having me pivot my life in a completely different direction. And he always gave me the support to explore that. So I would say definitely my dad. My dad also gave me that Tinkerer mindset. So I remember when I was a child, you know, I had a computer in the house since I was five years old. He was always looking at how do we build these things and, you know, all of them that definitely did foster a type of like love of technology for me as well. But definitely just his support with letting me, you know, go down my own path and my own journey, you know, as unorthodox as it was at some times. It was definitely something that I try to model when I do talk to people. I'm like, we can just jump in and it's all fine. We can, you know, find you the support and the resources you need. This is the path that you want to go down. In terms of accessibility and somebody that I, you know, admire in that, I would definitely say Karl Groves. Just because I really value his approach to things. He's very candid. I had the privilege of going to one of his workshops at AccessU and the way that he, you know, approaches his training sessions, very candid and with humor. That's kind of the way that I learn best is by just kind of making it easy and approachable. So I'm definitely a bit of a Karl Groves fangirl over here.

Marty:

That's awesome. Yeah. He kind of brings a little bit of a punk rock flair to accessibility too, when he teaches, which I really dig because he's cars and he's a trip. Those are great. And I love the fact that you made that question your own, you said, I'm going to give you an accessibility person there too, which is awesome.

Kristen:

So if you could recommend a game, a book, a movie, a podcast, or a show right now, something that you're in the middle of or something you've just loved for all time, what would you recommend?

Kara:

So there are two podcasts that I absolutely love and have been listening to a bunch over the last few years. The first one is It Could Happen Here with Robert Evans. Basically what the podcast is, it goes through the things that are happening in our current world today and how we are could potentially be on the edge of jumping into a, you know, second American civil war. But it's a podcast basically that, you know, goes through how kind of fascism, you know, can actually just happen here and how that dissent is kind of a little bit more slippery and happens a lot more quickly than people realize. That's definitely one that, you know, I like listening to. The other one is People I Mostly Admire with Steve Levitt. He's of Freakonomics fame. He interviews people of all different types of industries, you know, and really gets into their head, you know, about what makes them tick, you know, about their lives and their passions, and just is a great conversation with people of all different types of walks of life. So it's one of those podcasts that I like to listen to, you know, when I'm trying to connect more with the human race a little bit better. But yeah, those are my two big podcast recommendations. That's great.

Kristen:

I love the juxtaposition between, oh my God, we're all doomed, and we're okay, we're gonna be okay. We just follow these people.

Marty:

Well, I love that it's an economist, you know, talking about like people I mostly admire. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Like, right.

Kara:

Right, you know, we're all human here. I try not to get, you know, too doomsday and too gloom and doom, so I do have to balance out, you know, what I listen to with some more human-centric tales, some things that are a little bit more positive. It can be hard living in today's society, everything that's going on.

Kristen:

For sure. And we definitely want to stave off fascism at all costs, so I appreciate that recommendation.

Marty:

Generally agreed upon.

Kristen:

So we just really appreciate all of your time. I appreciate everyone, all of our audience members. Marty, it's always fun chatting and always a wish that these conversations can keep going. And Markus, behind the mic, we appreciate you for cleaning us up, keeping us in control. And Kara, I just appreciate all of your time with us today and We hope you come back and talk to us again.

Kara:

Yeah, absolutely. Anytime you want me back, just let me know and I'll be right here.

Marty:

Well, Kara, one thing I want to ask you about for our next episode with you, so you can already start thinking about it, is what is something that you're like really on right now about digital accessibility? You know, you're seeing it, you know, you're adding that into every conversation with somebody and

it might be something You don't have to answer that now. That's going to be for next time. But I absolutely want to bring you back to find out what is in your head, you know, this week, this month, this quarter of like, man, that's something that I want to make sure that we get fixed right throughout digital accessibility. Okay. Will you come back and answer that question?

Kara:

Absolutely.

Kristen:

Our podcast guest today is Kara Gaulrapp, Senior Digital Accessibility Specialist at University of Pennsylvania. Our hosts are Marty Molloy and Kristen Witucki, and our producers are Markus Goldman and Harper Yatvin. If you like what you heard today and want to explore more about digital accessibility, technology, our company culture, or anything else, schedule a time to meet with us. You can find the whole Tamman team at tammaninc.com. That's T-A-M-M-A-N-I-N-C.com. Don't forget to sign up for our newsletter too, so you never miss an event or an insight from us. Be sure to rate our podcast 5 stars on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you catch us. It really helps our podcast grow and reach new audiences. Also, make sure to follow us, hit that bell icon, so you never miss an episode. If social media is more your style, you can follow us at Tamman, Inc. on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook and share our podcast on your favorite platform. Until next time, thank you for listening and being a part of Article 19. Take care.