

Q What is a web accessibility overlay?

A Accessibility overlays, which include widgets and toolbars, are automated software solutions that apply third-party code to resolve accessibility problems on websites and applications. These overlay products are marketed as a solution to fix website coding issues that may prevent assistive technology from being used easily. The overlay works by applying a script to the webpage, which scans the code and automatically attempts to repair any issues.

Accessibility overlays serve two main purposes. Firstly, they provide a set of controls that allow users to adjust aspects of their user experience, such as colors, text size, and contrast. Secondly, they use JavaScript to make changes to the code and content of the website on the fly, in an attempt to fix any existing accessibility errors automatically.

Q Can an overlay make my site compliant?


A Many overlay vendors claim that their product can make a website fully compliant with WCAG accessibility standards and compliance laws. However, it's important to note that no product can fix all possible issues, and overlays are no exception. According to WCAG 2.1 Success Criteria, conformance is defined as meeting all of the requirements of the standard. Partial compliance is not sufficient. Therefore, any accessibility overlay provider claiming conformance is misrepresenting their product. It's important to recognize that overlays are not a solution to accessibility issues. They're simply Band-Aids that temporarily cover up problems that designers and developers continue to make. To truly address accessibility issues, we need to focus on solving them at the root level. By requiring designers and developers to address accessibility issues directly, we can ensure that our websites are truly accessible to everyone.

Q How do you become compliant?

A It takes time, expertise, and commitment to create an inclusive and accessible website that caters to people with disabilities. It's important to respect and include people with disabilities when designing and building your website. Make sure to prioritize accessibility features in your design process so that everyone can access your site. Allocate resources to perform regular automated and manual audits of your website and address the root causes of any issues you find, rather than just applying temporary fixes.

At Disability Solutions we use a combination of automated tools and manual testing with screen readers and keyboard navigation to evaluate and identify issues. We deliver a comprehensive summary of our findings and suggested solutions and/or best practices to ensure that our clients' websites meet the highest standards of Web Accessibility level AA.


Why are accessibility overlays so bad?

 Despite their claims of providing a quick fix to accessibility issues, overlays are not very effective. They often fail to address the underlying accessibility problems, leaving users with disabilities in a difficult situation.

Some overlay products can automatically fix accessibility issues on the underlying page. This repair is done when the page loads in the user's browser. However, the effectiveness of these repairs is limited by several factors, including the type and accuracy of the repair.


Instead, it's best to follow the industry's best practice approach, which is known as "native accessibility." This approach involves building accessibility into the design and code from the outset, rather than trying to fix it later with overlays.

How are accessibility overlays harmful to users?

 Broadly speaking accessibility overlays attempt to auto detect any assistive technology being used and turn on "recommended" settings for "easier usability" for the user. Or even modify the presentation of the website to the user. Changing settings such as color contrast or enlarge text or perform other changes. Some overlays even use AI or machine learning to fix any problems within the code that is preventing assistive technology from being used easily.


While in reality trying to "fix" underlying code assistive technology either cannot be used and/or is extremely difficult to use with the overlay enabled on the site. Many overlays make it extremely difficult to turn off the overlay if the user wants to do so. Forcing the user to find workarounds so they can have an equivalent web experience.

Is user privacy of personal data at risk?

 Overlays can sometimes pose privacy issues for users. Assistive technology users often have customized settings on their devices and browsers. Some overlays may automatically detect these settings in order to configure themselves to the user's needs. To do this, a cookie is saved on the user's device, which stores information about their disability settings without their explicit consent.

If a website uses an accessibility overlay, any other website that uses the same overlay can access the same cookie to apply the same configuration. This can result in a breach of the user's privacy since the information about an individual's disability is highly personal. The user never opted into such a breach. Moreover, having an accessibility overlay on your site can put you at risk of non-compliance with laws such as GDPR, CCPA, and others.

Do overlays affect website security and performance?

 When you add third-party scripts to your website, you may unknowingly introduce a security risk. This is because you are essentially trusting the vendor to maintain the security of their server, and any vulnerabilities in their system could directly impact the safety of your website.

In addition, adding JavaScript to your website can slow down its page load time. This is especially true for third-party scripts, as their speed is dictated by the vendor's server. It's important to note that search engines like Google place a high priority on site speed, which can affect your SEO ranking. Slowing down your site with an accessibility overlay can, therefore, negatively impact your Google search ranking.

Doesn't the disability community want/need tools like this?

 Many users who rely on assistive technologies have shared their feedback on overlay products, expressing their challenges and limitations. While these widgets may seem beneficial, they may not always cater to the unique needs of each user, leading to an ineffective or even counterproductive experience.

Additionally, users who require assistive technologies already have solutions that impact their entire device and web browsers. If an overlay overrides or conflicts with these settings or adapts unreliably, it can cause a frustrating experience for the user. It's important to recognize that not everyone can use the same methods to navigate a page. By considering the diverse range of users and their needs, we can work towards creating more inclusive and accessible solutions.