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## Access a key theme as businesses aim for secure, easy-to-navigate solutions

by Michelle Leach

Midlands firms are using technology in new ways or leveraging new tech solutions to support positive change within workforces and communities.

Late last month, Outlook Business Solutions announced the debut of Ally Support, a subscription-based digital accessibility testing service.

"We were going to make the digital world more accessible, one business website at a time," said Vice President Natalie Hadley.

She recalled discussing the market and legal risks of websites and apps that are inaccessible to the 1 in 4 U.S. adults who live with disabilities.

"We got a great, enthusiastic response," Hadley said. "But when it came time to get people to pay us to test their websites and make their websites more accessible, we were not finding a lot of traction."

They worked with a consultant and targeted website developers to create bundled services.

"We have all become conditioned to be OK with a subscription relationship," she said. "We targeted developers or internal development teams for larger companies to spread the cost of access testing across multiple clients."

Formerly, packages were project-based. Each subscription includes an introductory workshop, help desk, initial assessments, full audits, and detailed reports.

"A lot of companies are popping up as a 'silver bullet solution,'" Hadley said. "But they don't catch issues related to user experience. They're just crawling code. They don't have human users."

Some solutions may interfere with adaptive technology and pose data security risks.

Human testers are so important that, Hadley said, they are seeking testers beyond the visually impaired, accounting for other adaptive technologies.

Outlook Business Solutions forged important partnerships with the likes of legal consultants.

"[Accessibility] can't be an afterthought," she said. "It can't be one of the final 'check boxes;' it has to be baked in from the very beginning. You need to consider in your audience people who are hearing impaired, or who might be dyslexic ... When

you bake that in from the beginning, writers and graphic designers and coders are all on board. Everybody understands what each role is, and it's so much more cost-effective than getting to the end and having to rework it."

Before COVID-19, Red Branch Media was easing "pain points," such as bridging the gap between the contingent workforce and in-office staff, according to CEO Maren Hogan.

"Then the whole world became a series of pain points," she said.

Now, the digital media environment is much more about collaboration than a year ago.

"We're lucky in that we've always been geographically distanced from our clients, so [we] had already invested in collaborative and transparent solutions in order to get work done properly," Hogan said.

Hogan indicated the company is more empathetic in how technology and advertising is approached; for instance, it's sensitive to live streaming conference and webinar "fatigue."

"We instructed our clients to find on-demand solutions, e-courses, and even audio only (think Clubhouse and podcasting) to be sensitive to the demands constant work and education from home can bring," she said.

Additionally, its human resources and business-to-business clients were being leaned on far more heavily as their clients laid off people and slashed budgets.

She encourages businesses to "try all the things," (TikTok, Clubhouse, Discord), the definition of "relevant."

"Give every new technology at least a month," Hogan said. "See if you can learn the ins and outs. If it doesn't stick around (it'll likely get bought) then you've lost nothing, kept your brain elastic, and can be the go-to person people ask about new tech."

Hogan hopes communities will be democratized.

"Everyone keeps wanting to further insulate their communities, particularly from Facebook," she explained. "While this is good for the groups who are trying to wrest the control they freely gave away for a sophisticated platform, it might make it harder to gain traction in size in the future, or hide

certain communities away from those who desperately need access."

CEO Richard Nehrbooss indicated The MSR Group team is reinventing market research and how consumer insights are collected; Nehrbooss recalled what a careerist with Gallup and McKinsey told him: "They were getting 6 out of 10 people to respond to a survey. Now, you get less than a couple of percent."

Yet, the need to measure, in order to manage and improve is a constant.

"What we typically have done is email surveys or phone surveys," he said. "People don't like to be bugged with surveys, and it is typically a small sample size. We use artificial intelligence to listen to transactions, and we can report back the metrics."

Instead of a half of a percent response rate, one gets a 100% response.

"Everybody is interested in seeing how their customer satisfaction is going," he said, adding their technological approach has resulted in interest from banks, loan offices, hotels, restaurants, and car rental companies and dealerships, some of which are looking to satisfy compliance requirements.

Formerly, its focus was measuring physical, in-person interactions.

"[COVID-19] pivoted us toward the drive-through experiences," he said. "Now, our technology allows us to listen and track our experience in the drive-through."

For instance, workers may be coached by AI to ask customers if they would like dessert or another product to upsell.

At \$50/month (per device), Nehrbooss indicated the AI and software is within reach for one-man operations and enterprises alike.

"That small fee makes your employee that much better," he said.

Ashley Burton described Eckoh's industry — payments — as a "slow-moving beast," experiencing a broad, yet modest shift from traditional to digital and alternative payments like Apple Pay.

He described "record-breaking demand" for security and compliance solutions from contact centers, and accelerated need to take payments via digital methods and chan-

nels, as workers transitioned to working from home.

"Our clients look to us to reduce their risk of sensitive data exposure," Burton said. "We were able to help by allowing their contact center agents to capture sensitive data, such as credit card or social security numbers, but without the agent having to see or hear the data."

And the data wasn't handled in an uncontrolled home environment.

Cloud services are important for small- to mid-sized businesses.

"Doing everything yourself in your own data centers often burns up more time and resources," he said.

Communicate and process orders via channels such as web chat. And, Burton noted, don't solve one problem at a time, or treat security and compliance as an "afterthought."

"Some organizations leapt into implementing changes within their contact center or procuring new contact center solutions, only to find that they had then opened up or lost the opportunity to address an area of risk," he said.

In fact, a number of them reached a point where they had to stop taking payments for a time.

"They hadn't adequately secured their voice or web chat solutions, resulting in lost revenue," Burton said.

Organizations that embraced security in their day-to-day operations hit the ground running and adapted quickly, he said.

"With states like California and Virginia leading the way with [California Consumer Privacy Rights Act/Virginia Consumer Data Protection Act], other states are looking to adopt similar measures," Burton said. "While locally the Nebraska Consumer Data Privacy Act stalled, all businesses would be well-served by starting to think about how they minimize risk when processing and handling sensitive data."



Hadley

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