



All In

Accessibility & Inclusion @ Telstra

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AppsForAll lays down a lofty challenge for app developers

In the end, it all comes down to sharing. That's the lesson that Kelly Schulz and Amir Ansari have learned in their 40 years of combined experience at the coalface of accessible technology. Such is their conviction in this simple, overriding truth that they have established a not-for-profit online resource purely to bring app owners and developers onto the same page.

The site is called **AppsForAll** and, in just under a year, it has established itself as the go-to platform for advice about designing, building and quality-testing accessible apps. Already, the sharing is traversing oceans – with an audience that is nearly 50 per cent non-Australian, and lessons that are as pragmatic as they are universal.

Earlier this year, AppsForAll – a partnership between Telstra and the award-winning digital consultancy, Transpire – announced its presence with an appearance on UX Mastery's cult Slack chat, Ask the UXperts. The [discussion](#) broached some of the biggest challenges facing

User Experience (UX) professionals – from gold-star apps that are genuinely accessible, to tips for generating accessibility budgets and buy-in.

AppsForAll has since been highlighted at a number of leading tech events, including Adobe's World Interaction Design Day, where Amir, Transpire's Head of UX, delivered a keynote address entitled Good, Better, Best – A Pragmatic Way to Approach Accessibility. It is also generating growing traffic among the hundreds of app developers who have attended our Digital Accessibility training – where becoming better at accessibility is the name of the game.

Good to better

“Accessibility can be overwhelming for people who don’t understand it,” explains Amir, who’s made a life’s work out of delivering that understanding. “The goal of AppsForAll is to deliver knowledge and resources that will help app companies and developers go from ‘good’ to ‘better’.”

In fact, you don’t even have to be a ‘good’ developer to make good use of the site.

AppsForAll has clear lists of tips and resources for app owners, developers, designers and testers: from simple starters on fonts, contrasts and touchscreen capabilities; to ‘avoidables’ like audio autoplays and animated GIFs; to more comprehensive advice on getting feedback for different abilities, and road-testing pages with multiple screen-readers.

There are also tips for users about customising accessibility features on iOS and Android devices, as well as a lively blog with posts from Kelly, Amir and other accessibility experts.

Partners with potential

Kelly and Amir’s partnership dates back to 2013, when the pair were involved in developing two ground-breaking apps to adapt Google Glass for deaf and vision-impaired users. (Although the prototypes showed huge potential and won awards in Australia, they were ultimately dropped when Glass’s initial format was quietly shelved by Google.)

However, since 2016, Kelly and Amir have once more been stirring up the local app community – particularly through the hands-on accessibility training they’ve developed for our new [Empathy Lab](#), which has now reached hundreds of Telstra staff [see All In, Issue 2.] They also delivered their persuasive message to Telstra executives at last year’s Executive Leadership Forum.

But AppsForAll offers a foundation to spread Telstra’s accessibility message further afield – by advocating for formal standards to guide all app development.

“Since 2008, the [WCAG guidelines](#) have provided a single shared standard to make web content more accessible for people with disabilities,” says Kelly. “But a decade on, with six million apps in the market, we still don’t have an industry standard for native apps. Although most of the operating systems have good resources, they need to be brought together in one place and made simpler to understand and use.”

It’s a fact that gets Kelly and Amir hot under the collar – but also steels their determination to press for real change.

“The fact that so many apps in the app stores are still failing to meet basic accessibility requirements is a major failing in our industry.”
says Kelly.

“The solution is often just as simple as increasing your base font size or improving your contrast, which will benefit everyone on a bright day,” points out Amir. “Having subtitles on videos obviously helps the hearing-impaired – but it’ll also help someone who wants to watch a video discreetly on a train or in another noisy place.

“Our vision is to raise awareness about designing apps to suit everyone’s needs, so it becomes front of mind for product owners, designers, quality assurers – basically, anyone who’s responsible for any part of an app’s development. We’re talking about good design that benefits everyone!”

Partner Profile

Amir Ansari

42, Head of User Experience, Transpire

"I think that ignoring accessibility and inclusion fails to acknowledge the 20% of Australians who are living with some kind of disability or challenge with mobility or dexterity. There are so many apps being built that are basically leaving out this massive chunk of our population. What a wasted opportunity!"



Kelly Schulz & Amir Ansari

Where did you start your UX journey?

I used to design furniture and playgrounds before I entered the digital space in the early 2000s. I developed my interest in usability at the digital consultancy, Stamford Interactive, where among other things I was working on making the initial WCAG guidelines more usable.

What's your role at Transpire?

I lead the UX team, which includes seven designers, researchers and usability testers who are helping our clients build accessibility into different parts of their business. My role has also put me in touch with several charities and associations that support disability communities, and I was recently honoured to be invited to join the Board of Retina Australia in Victoria.

Why is accessibility so important to you personally?

I think that ignoring accessibility and inclusion fails to acknowledge the 20% of Australians who are living with some kind of disability or challenge with mobility or dexterity. There are so many apps being built that are basically leaving out this massive chunk of our population. What a wasted opportunity!

Do you believe that partnering with Telstra can make a difference?

Absolutely. Telstra is the largest and most influential technology company in the country, and it's a great honour to work with them. Working with Kelly [Schulz] is such an inspiration. Her blindness not only gives her the experience and empathy to identify accessibility gaps, but she has the intellect, the connections, and the never-say-die attitude to effect real change across Australia's largest network. I couldn't hope for a better partner-in-crime!

If you had to give one tip to an app developer, what would it be?

I think that ultimately the best practice for ensuring inclusive and accessible apps is to put your product in front of users with different abilities and ask them to try it out. I'm not just talking about people living with physical disabilities, but elderly people, people with cognitive impairments, people who may be suffering a temporary injury. The more people you can involve in this process early on, the more likely you are to meet their needs. This is what we call 'human centred design'.

Graduates at Telstra gain a crucial head start in life

For Ploy Siranyong, joining Telstra as a graduate fresh from university was a nerve-wracking leap of faith.

Not only was it her first foray into the job market, but with a rare eye disorder curtailing her central vision, the whip-smart 21-year old was wondering if she'd ever land "a proper job".

Three years later, Ploy has worked across our sales, marketing and e-learning businesses, and is currently making waves as a product marketer for cloud-based portfolios.

"It's been really inspiring to experience so many aspects of the business," says Ploy. "Since I joined, the whole of Telstra seems to have got better at supporting people with disability.



Ploy Siranyong, Telstra graduate

There's better awareness, better tech, and much more effort to make workplace adjustments from the get-go."

For Ploy, those adjustments include a screen reader and a laptop magnifier, video-enhanced web conferencing, and various Apple accessibility products. But the best assistance of all, she says, has been the attitude of her colleagues.

"My managers and workmates have all been fantastic – so kind and supportive, always checking what's the best way for me to work."

Ploy believes that Telstra's commitment to have people with disability make up at least 10 per cent of the graduate program has been a game-changer for the company.

That commitment, made in March 2017 in our first Accessibility & Inclusion Plan, was scheduled for June 2019 – but we reached the target a year earlier, when 11.7 per cent of our starting graduates in FY18 identified as living with a disability. (Sidenote - we also aced our target for gender representation, with women making up 52.5 per cent of new graduates!)

"It's very easy for someone like me to start thinking that any organisation focused on making money just won't hire someone with a disability," says Ploy. "But companies with a clear commitment to inclusive employment make a huge difference – even if they have to involve targets.

"This kind of target shows a proper commitment that, straight away, you can see filtering down through the whole organisation."

Stepping into a new paradigm

Part of the success of Telstra's graduate program is down to our long-standing partnership with the Australian Network on Disability (AND), which has helped us find 128 interns through its widely-lauded Stepping Into program since 2014.

Stepping Into manager Isabel Heiner says Telstra's involvement has been critical to its success, with 21 new interns joining Telstra in July –and rising numbers applying to join our graduate program after their studies.

“Telstra has been really accommodating with flexible working times and conditions, as well as taking care to match interns to jobs that relate to their degrees,” says Isabel. “They give interns their own projects, great supervisors, and a place that feels safe to have the conversations so many of them want to have.”

Much of this safety is down to AND, which provides tailored training to all intern supervisors as part of its broader advocacy and capacity-building partnership with our Accessibility and Inclusion team.

“It's all about tapping into talent early on, and Telstra is making sure they don't miss out on anyone who could be the best person for the

job,” notes Isabel. “So many students never have a chance to gain practical work experience – and that's even more the case for students with disabilities.”

Just ask Fufu Hu, a 22-year old software engineering student, who has just started the second part of an extended three-month internship at Telstra.

“I've been involved with three separate software-writing projects already,” says Fufu. “It's been a great experience. My colleagues and supervisor have all really helped make my work more productive, and I've learned the importance of so many aspects of professional communication and collaboration. At uni I got some good guidance on knowledge and problem-solving, but this internship has filled so many gaps for me in terms of practical skills for my working life.”

Fufu has experienced debilitating depression in the past, but says his internship has been a wholly positive experience for his mental health. “Doing this job and interacting with my colleagues makes me really happy,” he says. “I'm not just saying that. The support here is fantastic. I'm doing real work, tackling real problems, and making a positive contribution every day. Of course it makes me feel happy.”



Fufu Hu, software engineering student

“These graduates are our next generation of leaders, and we want to be recruiting the best in the business – and hanging onto them. The Stepping Into program is one way we can attract great talent, and then retain them through opportunities like our graduate program.”

**- Alicia Mathews,
Senior Specialist, Transformation
& People Team, Telstra**

Mobile app makes itself heard in our Tech4Good contest

Some tech ideas come as bolts from the blue: sudden ‘eureka moments’ that sneak up when you’re least expecting them. But experience shows that those ideas more likely to succeed are those that map out their user journey, and ensure that they are desirable, viable and feasible.

This was the case with Auslan Anywhere – an inspiring idea to share Auslan signs and resources between Deaf and hearing young people – which has been selected as one of five finalists in the Telstra Foundation’s Tech4Good Challenge.

A brainchild of the Expression Australia team, the project benefited from our new Tech4Good program, which funds participating non-profits to ‘future-proof’ their ideas through five months of innovation training with leading service and user design experts from [Academy Xi](#).

At the end of the training, 15 non-profit proposals were presented to the Telstra Foundation Board, which had the unenviable task of choosing five that best leveraged technology to drive social inclusion outcomes for diverse or vulnerable young people.

The projects – including an app to link young people with autism to jobs, a digital assistant to help the homeless, a digital platform to support teachers and students to learn about Indigenous culture and history, and a 24/7 mobile app that delivers real time mental health support – will each receive \$450,000 over the next two years to push them towards commercial development.

In keeping with [Tech4Good](#)’s mandate, the training was made as accessible as possible – including Auslan interpreters being on hand for the [Expression Australia](#) team.

“Rather than being seen as a cost or logistics burden, we were made to feel that we were valuable members of the group with a unique perspective to bring,” says Expression Australia’s Youth Engagement Officer, Olivia Beasley, who is herself Deaf. “It’s very rare that we have access to workshops and courses like those at Academy Xi, and to explore different tech concepts and areas of service design we had no previous experience of... it really was priceless!”



Expression Australia staff with a ‘low tech’ prototype of the app. L-R: Auslan interpreter Melissa Martin, Engagement Manager Maxine Buxton, Youth Engagement Officer Olivia Beasley, Director of Language, Partnerships and Innovation Brent Phillips, CEO Christine Mathieson, and Auslan interpreter Sarah Howell. Olivia is demonstrating the sign for “Auslan”.

Answers for everyone

As well as sustained funding, each of the winning teams has been allocated a mentor by Telstra, who will provide tech advice, coaching and UX (User Experience) support during the design and build phases. This is important for Expression Australia, who want to develop an app that answers the needs of all people – including those without a strong connection to the Deaf community.

“We know so many young people who are frustrated by the lack of access to Auslan resources for themselves, their families, friends and colleagues,” explains Expression Australia’s Engagement Manager, Maxine Buxton. “One thing that will set this app apart is that users will

be able to customise their profiles to select the information they want, and all content will be crowdsourced from the community – not filmed in production studios.

“So really, the community will be front and centre of the whole design process – and we’ll require lots of input from across the community to make sure it’s a success!”

Auslan Anywhere (a working title) will make sign language available on demand by providing instant access to common signs and sentences, guidelines and suggestions, stories and even songs – all contributed by users through their phones.

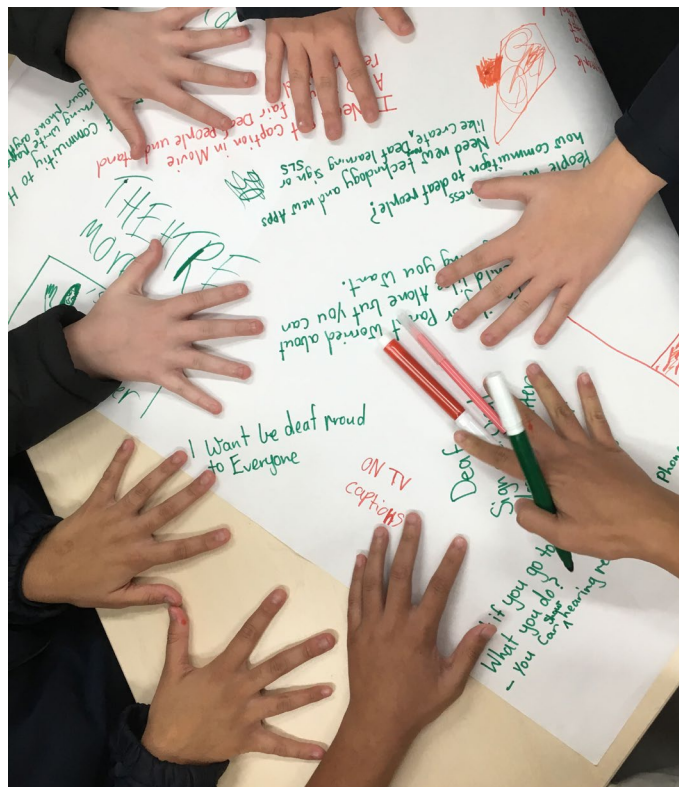
“Our research shows that Deaf people and their friends want access to these resources easily and on the go,” says Olivia. “This app will enable them to request translations for specific words, and the Deaf community will respond by uploading videos to match these requests.

“All the content will come directly from the Deaf community – which will make them feel involved and in control of the app.”

The two-year funding will enable the Expression Australia team to undertake comprehensive research with different user cohorts, refine their concept, build a working prototype, and test and evaluate it in the field.

Jackie Coates, who heads up the Telstra Foundation, says the Tech4Good program – with its combination of training and funding – makes it a unique proposition for Australian non-profits.

“For a non-profit, being able to confidently apply digital innovation principles to shape an idea will position them for either a well-designed product or a fail-fast scenario. Both are great outcomes when stakes are high and resources are precious – we don’t want to see non-profits investing heavily in ideas that don’t work. Essentially Tech4Good helps non-profits scaffold their digital product and services for the best chance of success through the tools and methodologies widely used by many innovative companies, start-ups, and social enterprises. We believe non-profits



Students’ hands and inspired thoughts from a focus group at the Victorian College for the Deaf.

have a rightful place in the digital innovation ecosystem and should be supported to leverage technology to scale their impact – and our Tech4Good participants are a great proof-point.”

“This combination of accessible innovation training and seed funding to develop a strong business case, followed by two years of pilot and evaluation funding, make this funding model, I believe, a first for corporate foundations in Australia.”

For more on this story:

Tech4Good hub: <https://exchange.telstra.com.au/telstra-news/telstra-foundation/tech4good/>

Meet the Tech4Good finalists: <https://exchange.telstra.com.au/five-tech4good-charities-were-backing-to-reimagine-social-inclusion/>