The Accessibility and Usability of Online Job Applications for Screen Reader Users

What Were We Trying to Learn?

The purpose of this study was to investigate the accessibility and usability of online job applications for individuals with visual impairments who rely on screen readers. The primary objectives were to evaluate and document accessibility challenges experienced by this group of users and better understand their user experience.

Research Takeaway

Online job applications continue to present significant accessibility challenges for individuals with visual impairments who use screen readers. The study revealed that 44.4% of the application attempts could not be completed due to accessibility barriers.

How Was This Project Carried Out?

The research was conducted by having three blind, experienced screen reader users evaluate online job applications from 30 randomly selected Fortune 500 companies, with 90 application trials attempted. Each tester used a different combination of screen reader and browser. Accessibility engineers closely monitored the tests, recording various data points, including the nature and impact of encountered issues, as well as compliance with WCAG 2.1 guidelines. Testers also provided feedback on their user experiences, highlighting specific barriers and rating the ease of use of the job application sites.

What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

The testers experienced significant barriers to completing the online job applications. Highlights of the study results were:

- 50 of the 90 (55.6%) attempted applications were successful, highlighting the prevalence of accessibility barriers in the online job application process.
- 23 of the 30 (76.7%) sites had critical issues that prevented at least one tester from completing the application.
- The accessibility and usability of online job applications varied considerably depending on the combination of screen reader and browser used.
- 26 out of 30 job applications were created by eight different vendors, and there was considerable variation in accessibility across applications from the same vendor.

How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

Our findings are relevant to anyone interested in ensuring equal access to employment opportunities for individuals who rely on screen readers. This research highlights the importance of prioritizing accessibility in online job applications, both by companies and the software vendors they employ.

Software vendors are encouraged to only offer accessible options for creating online job applications, such that companies would not be able to create an inaccessible form. The results also suggest the need for continued efforts to remove barriers and improve usability to create a more inclusive job application process for all.

Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:
Reuschel, W., McDonnall, M., & Burton, D. (2023). The accessibility and usability of online job applications for screen reader users. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, *117* (6), 479-490.

For more information about this project, visit the project overview page.

Contact Us

Email: nrtc@colled.msstate.edu
Webpage: blind.msstate.edu or ntac.blind.msstate.edu
Facebook: www.facebook.com/msu.nrtc/
Twitter: @MSU_NRTC
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/nrtc-blindness-lowvision/
Instagram: @nrtc_blv

The contents of this manuscript were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, NIDILRR grant 90RTEM0007-01-00. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and Human Services and should not indicate endorsement by the Federal Government.