Interview Jen Devins - In The Pocket (transcript)

Jen: My name is Jen Devins and I am the head of Google's accessibility UX team.

I've been in this position for a few years. I've been focusing on accessibility and inclusive design for about seven years, total while at Google. And then before that, I was also at Google for a while , more as just a design manager and individual contributor.

Niels: So how did you start your career? Was it always in design? What did you study?

Jen: I was always in design. I started as an industrial designer for my bachelor's and then just through different courses, got involved and interested in educational technology which led me to going for a master's in education with a focus on instructional technologies.

To help people learn and engage with the tools. And while I never did go into academics and actually teach, it was very, very much related to user experience. And actually, I don't even think back then we called it user experience. It was just more of interaction design. I got my first job in the tech industry actually as a researcher.

And then within that, it was a small enough team that we could do both design and research, and I just kind of led more towards Design. So I was doing design for many years. And then like I said, about seven years ago, just with the advent of my parents getting older, my father had dementia and Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, and just understanding and watching him and my mother who was just aging gradually.

Not being able to use our products. So, you know, even the ones that I was working on really resonated with me because I had always felt very proud that as a user experience designer, that I was the voice of the user. And what became very clear is that I wasn't the voice of all users. I was the voice of the people that had perfect vision and perfect cognition So that, and then I also started myself.

I started losing my hearing. It's moderate loss, but it was just noticing like the impact that disabilities can have on daily life. So there was an opportunity in the company to. Focus on that, which I started within the G suite area. So Google docs and Gmail, et cetera. and then a few years ago transitioned to manage the company-wide user experience team for accessibility.

Niels: What does a typical day of your role look like?

Jen: Well, so what's really cool about Google is , while we are a central team, there are many , what I call like sister teams across the company and our different areas. So there's a lot of collaboration and consulting with those teams in those specific areas.

My personal day does involve a little bit, I would say of consulting on actual design issues, but my team does a lot more of that. My day is spent a lot of just thinking kind of at a more strategic level of how can we bake accessibility into current design practices or research practices?

How do we just kind of, as a company approach things a bit more inclusively. So I have many of those types of conversations. The other thing that's really exciting to me is my team

and the central accessibility team at large, we also work on developing products that are specifically designed for people with disabilities.

So I have researchers and designers on the team that are actively trying to solve and create products for people that have dyslexia that have different cognitive disabilities. So Google lookout is one of those products, voice access and switch access. So there's a whole slew of really interesting problems that create really interesting products that have really, really interesting interaction design challenges. So that's, that's also part of my day.

Niels: And when you're talking about your team, You said that it consists of designers and researchers are also engineers involved or is it a separate team?

Jen: Yeah. So our greater central accessibility organization, we do have a team of engineers. Just like most products teams, there is kind of that triad of research, design and engineer and program manager so forth. Um, so yeah, we partner daily with them.

Niels: And you say it's a centralized team. Do you see any advantages over educating teams separately or just a centralized team that can act as a consultant for other teams?

Jen: Yeah, I think, if a company has the resources the ideal set up is to have a centralized team, but also have, um, it's kind of like a, almost like trickle down in a way, like you have the centralized team and then within the different product areas to have also some people dedicated to accessibility, but definitely you also want everybody to be thinking about this.

My ultimate goal outside of Google, even just as designers and researchers and engineers, you know, we just, it's just part of the process because it is focusing on accessibility and just being more inclusive. It's just good design. So that's my ultimate goal. But what we've seen is , because it is important for everybody to kind of get some experience to have just like one team that works on accessibility for other teams, isn't ideal either.

So to have a central team that's really knowledgeable and is kind of in this space and working with these users on a day-to-day basis that is really important to help teams with maybe some of those trickier problems or just thinking a bit more, out there for different product ideas.

But then having the knowledge within the product teams to understand like just the foundational really fundamental things of how to ensure that a website is accessible. Like, we want everybody to be aware of that and practice that as well. So ideally you have a bit of both like the centralized team and then everybody else is also still responsible.

Niels: If you would explain to one of those teams in your own words, what a accessible is or stands for, how would you explain it to them?

Jen: I think this is an important topic to talk about definitions too in terminology. Cause there is a lot of, I think, fuzziness between some of these things we were talking about.

So accessibility to me is really about ensuring that people with disabilities are able to perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with products, services, tools, whatever it is. In order so that they can contribute equally. So that's kind of the ultimate goal and the specific focus there obviously is people with disabilities.

And then when we start talking about inclusive design , I would say taking a step back. Accessibility is kind of an outcome, right? Like that's the end result that your product is accessible and that's definitely what we want. Inclusive design, when we talk about that, that's more of a process and that's ideally just the design process, not a separate one.

And inclusive design is where I ideally, from the beginning, you're thinking about, well, not even just thinking about getting in there and understanding the needs of more diverse users. So going even beyond accessibility, thinking about race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Kind of taking that into consideration throughout the process is also equally as important as ensuring that your product is accessible.

Niels: Do you have any methods to help teams to understand the difference? Because a lot of product teams we see, even at our company, we are all the same. Do you have a method or a way to get to know other groups or just be knowledgeable about those groups?

Jen: Well, the ideal situation is to get out and actually speak with users. And ideally, even if you're really following a great inclusive design process, you're going beyond just talking with users.

It's doing extensive field research, especially again in the, in the beginning. So you're truly understanding what are the needs and the challenges and then bringing that back and maybe, you know, that's where personas can come into play and just ensuring that your personas are representative of people with different needs and abilities.

The other thing that we're seeing many more companies and everybody trying to explore more is going even beyond that and doing things like co-design and really just having people that represent your actual users. Contributing more to the actual design, not just evaluating the designs after they're done.

So the more we can do that we'd be in such better shape. And, you know, it's very clear that it's hard sometimes to gain access to different people and stuff. And one of the things, I mean, there's a lot of information out there on the web and videos, and even personas of people just kind of explaining what their daily life is like in these different perspectives.

And there's also a lot of organizations that are usually like, Specifically, I'm talking about for people with disabilities, there's many different organizations in cities and towns that help people. And often if we reach out to them, they're more than willing to engage and see if there's an opportunity to just talk with the members of their organization.

Niels: You say it's important to, to start from the beginning, because you shouldn't lose sight of all users. But when a company wants to decide later on or just gets to know more about accessibility, where should they start to be more inclusive or make the product more accessible?

Jen: That's a good question because we realized that it is sometimes hard to focus everything in the beginning, you know? Just almost working a bit backwards. Right? There's the very, again, the fundamentals of just ensuring that your product is meeting the accessibility standards.

And I know in the United States it might be a little bit different but there are some really great guidelines out there that help ensure that. A basic website or application is accessible to people in particular with disabilities that use different assistive technologies. So I think starting there is honestly like a bare minimum and would be amazing if more teams could do that.

And then I would say even if your product is already out there to go out and ask users with different abilities or even going beyond that and thinking beyond ability , to actually test your product and understand like, what are some of those pitfalls?

Cause I think until you actually see our teams see that in action and see how people potentially struggle and just understand how different people can actually approach your product and how the experience is so different when you're using it through these different assistive technologies.

It's like until you see that in action or even over a video, it's hard to really comprehend. The more we can do that , even if it's after things are launched, I think that will help with the momentum within the teams to really want to prioritize that work.

Niels: And when you're testing after the product has launched to the users, is that the only way to see if there's a specific need for improvements? Or do you use any other data to improve the product, say for a specific group of users .

Jen: I'll always prioritize testing with actual users to really understand the full experience and be able to ask a little bit more and dig into things like, why are they using things this way?

Or why are these experiences challenging. For accessibility in particular like technical accessibly, there are tools out there as well. That can be used to actually do an audit of the code and those will bring up those really crucial fundamental issues like around contrast or missing accessibility labels for screenreader users.

There's mobile and web tools that teams could use. You know, and then there's definitely an approach kind of like a heuristic evaluation that teams can do as well. And if you just kind of take a step back and think about your product and maybe some of the tasks that people try to achieve on your product and kind of go through the list and actually think about, okay, what are all of the abilities I need to do this effectively. What if I only could use one hand? So this is really starting to tap into that notion of the fact that, yes, there are permanent disabilities or people with permanent disabilities, but we all experienced situational and temporary disabilities. And so just kind of almost putting yourself in the shoes of like, If you're walking down the street, you know, holding a child and one arm and you can only use one hand, can you achieve that task or if you're in the bright sunlight, you know, it's a little bit challenging to see the screen.

Can you still perform the task or if you're in a really loud environment, do you have to be able to hear what's happening in the application or the device? So, uh, I think that's something we're trying to do. We, and I think in the industry are trying to really help people acknowledge and understand a bit more.

Cause I think just approaching it that way also makes it feel one, I think, uh, maybe a little bit less daunting. And two it just helps reinforce that this is just good design, right? Like this is good for everybody thinking about all these different situations we could all be in a point that would maybe impact our experience.

Niels: When you say working for the specific situations, there is, of course the basic checklist for accessibility. And when you implement that compared to making specific changes. Do you see an increase in design or development time for that?

Jen: So following the standard accessibility design guidelines early definitely helps. Cause there are, there are many things that can be considered before you get into code. and that's where across the industry, we're really trying to remind folks. So again, I always go back to these basics because these are some of the most common issues that could be addressed really early, around contrast, around thinking about what is the keyboard navigation experience; these things can actually be thought of and considered, in the design phase.

And just thinking about what is that ideal experience? Ideally the earlier you do that, there's less need for retrofitting or, you know, making changes late in the game. I will say of course if you've never done this before, there's always going to be extra time needed and devoted to this, obviously to learn it and kind of get familiar with it.

But even after that, like these are extra steps that need to be considered. But, you know, the goal is, and the hope is that people recognize the benefit of this. Not just from their business perspective, cause it can improve your business, right? Like who you can reach and the loyalty of your users.

I mean, it can go really far. But we're hoping that by seeing the benefits of this, that teams are willing to prioritize and make the time for it.

Niels: Also, it would improve it for all users and specific user groups. That's maybe also something some stakeholders don't always see, and it's not because of bad intentions, but they are thinking about the money and time that gets into it. And when they say it costs us too much to, to focus on a small user group. Is there something you would say to them? When you hear a comment like that, it takes so much time or it's too expensive.

Jen: This again, gets back to that message around the fact that yes, there are, well, one, the number of people with more permanent disabilities is not small.

It's like 1 billion plus people across the world. So there is that angle of you're missing out potentially on not just these direct users, but they're friends and family, and there's a lot to be said of when friends and family or actual users, see that companies or products are focusing on this, that they do become more loyal.

They're more interested in sticking with that and seeing where they're going to take it. So that's one angle, but then again, Going back to this notion that we will all have some disability at some point because of temporary and situational ones. We sometimes share the number of like there are actually about 6 billion plus people who are temporarily able-bodied, you know, that means like, yes, we might have our full abilities right now, but given any certain circumstance, we might lose that. And so it's really noting that this truly is helping everybody in these different situations.

Niels: How do you think new technology can improve experience for users with the disability like the auto captioning in Google Meet or YouTube. Do you have any examples of how this type of technology with AI can, can improve the experience for specific users?

Jen: I think technology has a lot of potential. Some of the most exciting things that I've been seeing around AI and machine learning in particular are around voice recognition. And so at Google, I don't know how familiar you are with project Euphonia , which is essentially helping people with different disabilities and in particular people with ALS that are losing their ability to speak over time. And so they're recording, they're able to record their voice as it is today, and then use AI to actually speak as they used to as their voice degrades over time, which we've heard from a lot of people is just, is giving obviously the ability to continue to speak, but to be able to speak in your own voice is, is very, very important.

And other areas that are around live relay, which allows people to basically have conversations through their phones and it allows people to basically have conversations if you can't hear or speak and, but one other person can.

So it allows you to type in your message if you cannot speak and it will be translated into audio for the person that can hear. And so it's just kind of two way means of communication using different modalities. And you can also think about how it could help with translations too.

And it allows people to have a more fluid conversation. Even if they don't speak the same language or if they can't speak in the same way. So, yeah, I think there's a lot of potential here. The other thing that I always like to keep in the back of my head too though, is around the inclusiveness of technology in general.

And I think what COVID has shown us a lot is there is a definite digital divide, right. And people who can access technology through accessibility and because they have a disability, but also just like, can they afford it? Do they have good access to wifi, you know , I think it's really important for us to remember that while we're providing and creating these amazing tools that they need to be reached by the people that need them the most.

Niels: For these products, is it mostly something your team comes up with or are there other teams where you get involved and help them out to make that product?

Jen: Yeah, actually, those two specific ones are not done by the central accessibility team per se. But I think it also goes to show like there's teams across the company that are really driven to really help focus on solving these challenges. And we do definitely consults on a lot of these efforts, but those particular ones were done by other teams. Some of the other areas that are just as compelling and useful for everyone are things like smart compose, which is in Gmail and Docs now where you start typing something and it, you can see that it will auto complete basically what you want to say or what it thinks you're about to type.

And there are so many tools like that that are so useful. If you just think about it, obviously, if you have a difficult time typing due to arthritis or anything like that's a huge improvement, but also anybody that it just makes typing easier right. And faster and it can actually help with your grammar and things like that as well.

So, yeah, I think there's, there's a lot of potential out there.

Niels: Yeah. I find it very useful, at least the autocomplete in Google Docs. So that saves me a lot of time and especially grammar mistakes. Yes. Do you have another example of a product that is very good with accessibility or inclusive design can be either within Google or a product you use from day to day?

Jen: Yeah. Well, so again, smart compose, I think is just like right up there. And even auto-complete like as we are used to it before, just like auto-complete in a search, you know, that actually started to help people that had challenges typing. So I think that's just such a great example of how thinking about those kinds of edge cases, really can help benefit all of us. And then there's even older ones that I think are really profound. So the typewriter, one of the first typewriters that was developed in the 18 hundreds by somebody that needed to communicate with one of their deaf friends. Out of that need came this innovation. And then similarly, the first email protocol, which was created by Vint Cerf. He did that out of a need to better communicate with his wife who is deaf while he was away. These are all just, pretty substantial examples. If you think about how both of those solutions have permeated our lives, and while they're pretty extreme. There are definitely more subtle ones. Like I think it just really goes to show that the more you can start with those edge cases and really kind of understand, what are the needs and the challenges that truly sparks really innovative solutions.

Niels: One final question, if there's one tip you could give to a product team to make their products or service, more inclusive, would you have one tip?

Jen: Yeah, I think it keeps coming back to any way you can interact and reach out to real users. So again, this could be through doing actual research or even more ideally bringing people in through co-design workshops or participatory design workshops, even setting up like a panel of a few people that you can kind of meet with regularly and share the progress. And the key is the earlier that you can share some of these ideas and concepts the better. And I know that's seems maybe challenging and daunting, but there are many different ways you can go about that. Even if it's just first researching on the internet and understanding, searching videos of people that have different disabilities.

Cause there's a lot of great information out there that people are willing and wanting to show like, this is how I use this product and just kind of getting a bit more immersed in that space, but again, the ultimate goal is to actually go out and talk and interact with different users.

I know you asked for only one tip but I would also say just at a very fundamental level ensuring that you're following accessibility design guidelines, that just will help. It will help unblock a lot of unnecessary blockers if that makes sense. So just making sure that those things are addressed in your applications can go a really long way.