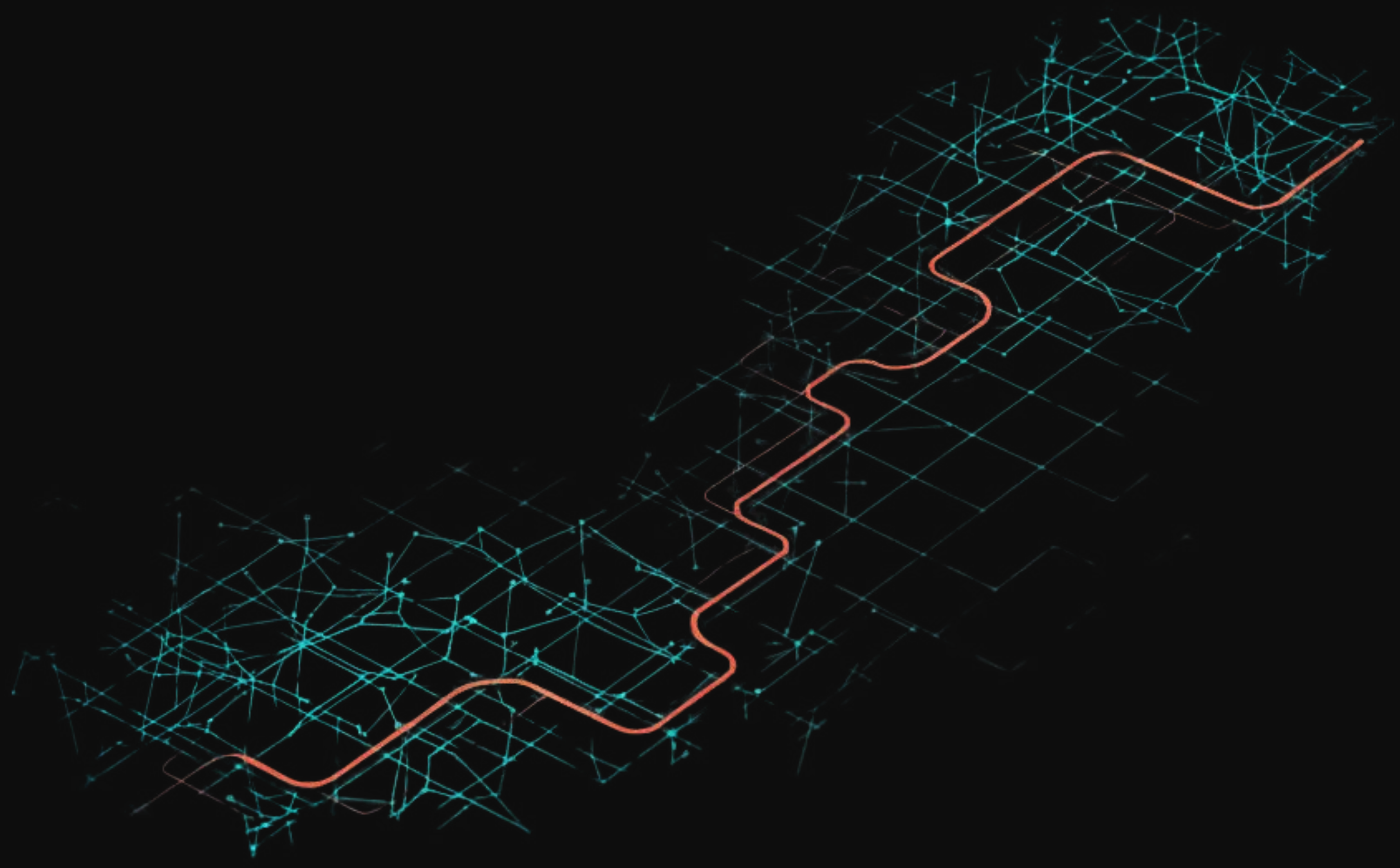
VERSION 1.0

ACCESSIBILITY RISK & READINESS PLAYBOOK

FOR SECURITY-LED SOFTWARE COMPANIES



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How to Use This Playbook

- This document is a **readiness artifact**, not a remediation guide
- Each section stands alone
- Designed for **product, engineering, security, and revenue leadership**
- Use this to align internally before procurement forces urgency

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1. Why Accessibility Suddenly Appears in Enterprise Deals

Purpose	Normalize accessibility as a late-stage procurement input
Takeaway	Accessibility appears when buyer risk posture changes
Avoid	Treating this as a product failure

For many SaaS companies, accessibility does not surface as part of early product planning. It tends to appear later, often after security, privacy, and data protection questions have already been addressed. This is not unusual. In enterprise and public-sector sales, accessibility typically emerges as part of a broader procurement and risk review, alongside requirements such as SOC 2, data residency, or vendor security questionnaires. It is rarely raised because of a specific product issue, and more often because the buying organization is standardizing how vendors are evaluated.

From the vendor's perspective, this can feel abrupt. Teams may have shipped for years without accessibility being mentioned, only to encounter it suddenly as a formal requirement tied to a specific deal. This timing is not a signal that something has gone wrong; it reflects when accessibility becomes operationally relevant to the buyer.

Understanding this context matters. **Accessibility is not introduced because a product has changed, but because the buyer's risk posture has**. As companies move into larger enterprise or government environments, expectations shift from informal trust to documented readiness. Accessibility becomes part of that shift.

This framing helps explain why accessibility often feels unexpected and why treating it as a late-stage procurement input, rather than a foundational product failure, leads to more effective responses.

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2. How Accessibility Enters the Procurement Process

Purpose	Explain how accessibility arrives operationally
Takeaway	This follows known enterprise workflows
Avoid	Over-interpreting underspecified requests

Accessibility most often enters enterprise deals through the same channels as other compliance and trust requirements.

Common entry points include:

Entry Point	What It Signals
Vendor questionnaires or RFPs	Standardized risk screening
Legal follow-ups	Formal obligation review
Trust reviews	Deal-size or sector trigger
Standardized requirements	Applied to all vendors in a category

In many cases, the initial request is brief and underspecified. Teams may be asked to "provide a VPAT," "confirm Section 508 compliance," or "describe accessibility status," without further guidance. This is typical of procurement-driven processes, where the request is designed to surface risk signals rather than initiate a technical discussion.

Importantly, these requests are often handled by functions outside product and engineering, procurement, legal, or vendor risk teams, even though the answers depend on product behavior. As a result, accessibility questions can arrive with limited context, unclear expectations, and short response windows.

At this stage, buyers are not usually looking for detailed remediation plans or architectural explanations. The immediate goal is to determine whether accessibility is understood, owned, and being addressed in a structured way, consistent with other enterprise requirements.

Recognizing accessibility as a **process-driven input**, rather than a product-driven critique, helps teams respond more effectively and avoid unnecessary disruption.

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3. What Enterprise Buyers Actually Look For (and What They Don't)

Purpose	Reset expectations around evaluation
Takeaway	Credibility beats completeness
Avoid	Over-engineering early signals

When accessibility enters an enterprise deal, it is rarely evaluated in isolation.

In most procurement and trust reviews, accessibility artifacts are treated the same way as other compliance signals: they are scanned quickly, compared against expectations, and often reviewed relative to alternatives rather than against an absolute standard.

In practice, buyers tend to look for a small set of signals:

Signal	What It Communicates
Clarity	The team understands the request
Ownership	Risk is managed
Consistency	Internal alignment
Transparency	Predictability

What they usually do not look for at this stage:

- Deep technical implementation detail
- Exhaustive remediation coverage
- Evidence that every possible issue has already been resolved

In several enterprise sales processes, accessibility artifacts are reviewed side-by-side with those of competing vendors. In these cases, the evaluation is often comparative rather than absolute. A clearer, more coherent accessibility signal, even if incomplete, can carry more weight than a more technically advanced but poorly explained one.

Another pattern teams frequently underestimate is buyer skepticism toward accessibility documentation itself. Many enterprise and government buyers do not treat VPATs or similar statements as self-verifying. Instead, they may validate claims using internal testing teams or third-party assessors, often focusing on a limited set of representative workflows rather than full coverage.

As a result, accessibility artifacts are often evaluated on two parallel dimensions:

- **Whether the documentation is credible and internally consistent**
- **Whether spot-checks align reasonably with what the documentation claims**

This dynamic reinforces an important distinction for product and engineering leaders. Early accessibility efforts are not judged on theoretical completeness, but on whether scope, claims, and observable behavior are aligned. Over-engineering in pursuit of exhaustive coverage can consume roadmap capacity without materially improving procurement outcomes. Conversely, a well-scoped, well-owned initial signal that matches real product behavior tends to hold up better under scrutiny.

The practical takeaway is not that accessibility requirements are superficial, but that, in enterprise contexts, **credibility, consistency, and comparability** matter more than depth at the first point of evaluation.

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4. The Common Failure Modes Teams Fall Into

Purpose	Surface predictable missteps
Takeaway	Most failures are framing errors
Avoid	Panic responses

When accessibility enters an enterprise deal unexpectedly, teams often respond under time pressure and with limited context. The resulting issues are usually not technical mistakes, **but process and framing missteps**.

Several failure modes appear repeatedly across security-led SaaS organizations.

One common pattern is **treating accessibility as a binary pass/fail requirement**. Teams assume the request implies full compliance is immediately required, leading to broad scoping, rushed remediation, and unnecessary disruption to the roadmap. In practice, most buyers are assessing readiness and credibility, not completeness.

Another frequent issue is **over-indexing on documentation without alignment to product reality**. Teams may focus on producing a VPAT or written response quickly, without validating that the claims reasonably reflect current product behavior. When buyers later perform spot-checks, even small mismatches can undermine confidence more than acknowledged gaps would have.

A related failure mode is **delegating accessibility entirely outside product and engineering**. Because requests often arrive through legal or procurement channels, accessibility can be treated as a paperwork exercise rather than a product-adjacent concern. This disconnect makes it harder to answer follow-up questions and increases the risk of inconsistent messaging.

Some teams go in the opposite direction and **over-engineer early efforts**, attempting to address every possible accessibility issue before responding. This approach can consume significant engineering capacity without

materially improving procurement outcomes, especially when buyer evaluation is limited to a narrow set of workflows.

Finally, teams sometimes **delay engagement entirely**, assuming accessibility can be deferred until it becomes unavoidable. While this may avoid short-term work, it often results in higher disruption later, when response windows are shorter and expectations less flexible.

These failure modes are not a sign of negligence or lack of care. They reflect a mismatch between how accessibility is commonly discussed and how it is actually evaluated in enterprise contexts. Recognizing these patterns early allows teams to respond with more control, less friction, and fewer surprises.

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5. Accessibility as a Risk-Management Problem (Not a UX Initiative)

Purpose	Reframe accessibility ownership
Takeaway	This belongs with trust and compliance
Avoid	UX-only framing

Many of the failure modes described earlier stem from a single misframing: treating accessibility primarily as a design or user-experience initiative, rather than as a **risk and readiness concern**.

In enterprise contexts, accessibility is rarely evaluated in isolation. It is considered alongside other indicators of vendor maturity, security posture, compliance readiness, documentation quality, and internal ownership. From the buyer's perspective, accessibility functions less as a feature assessment and more as a signal of how a company manages obligations that sit outside core product differentiation.

This distinction matters for product and engineering teams. When accessibility is framed as a UX initiative, discussions tend to focus on interface details, edge

cases, and completeness. When framed as a risk-management problem, the focus shifts to scope control, consistency of claims, and the ability to respond predictably under scrutiny.

Enterprise buyers typically ask a small number of implicit questions:

- Is accessibility understood as a formal requirement?
- Is there clear ownership?
- Are known gaps acknowledged rather than obscured?
- Do written claims align with observable product behavior?

These questions mirror those asked in other trust and compliance reviews. They are not designed to surface perfect implementations, but to identify unmanaged risk.

Reframing accessibility in this way also explains why over-engineering and under-engagement are both problematic. Over-engineering attempts to eliminate all risk at once, often at significant roadmap cost. Under-engagement leaves risk unacknowledged and unmanaged. In both cases, the underlying issue is not technical execution, but the absence of a structured risk lens.

Treating accessibility as part of a broader risk-management posture allows teams to reason about it using familiar concepts: bounded scope, staged maturity, explicit ownership, and credible signaling. This framing does not diminish the importance of accessibility; it places it in the same operational category as other enterprise-facing responsibilities.

From this perspective, the goal is not to “solve accessibility,” but to ensure it is **managed intentionally**, in a way that aligns with how enterprise buyers evaluate trust and readiness.

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6. Defining Scope Without Disrupting the Roadmap

Purpose	Reduce scope anxiety
Takeaway	Scope enables predictability
Avoid	Open-ended commitments

One of the most common sources of friction around accessibility is uncertainty about scope. When requirements arrive late in a sales cycle, teams are often forced to reason about impact quickly, with incomplete information. In the absence of clear boundaries, accessibility can appear unbounded, touching every screen, every workflow, and every release.

In practice, enterprise buyers do not expect full remediation across an entire product at the point accessibility first enters the conversation. What they look for instead is evidence that scope is **understood, deliberate, and controlled**.

Defining scope in this context is less about enumerating fixes and more about establishing boundaries. Teams that respond effectively are able to articulate what parts of the product are in focus, what assumptions are being made, and what is intentionally deferred. This allows accessibility to be reasoned about in the same way as other non-functional requirements that evolve over time.

For product and engineering leaders, this framing is important. Without an explicit scope, accessibility work tends to expand opportunistically, driven by individual findings rather than overall risk. This can create the perception that accessibility work is inherently disruptive, when the disruption is often a result of unclear boundaries rather than actual effort.

Conversely, a well-defined scope, even if narrow, provides a stable reference point. It allows teams to assess effort realistically, communicate consistently with non-technical stakeholders, and avoid repeated re-scoping as new questions arise. It also creates alignment between what is documented, what

is observable in the product, and what engineering is actually committing to support.

The key distinction is that scope is not a promise of completeness. It is a mechanism for predictability. When accessibility is scoped intentionally, it becomes possible to integrate it into planning conversations without derailing delivery or creating open-ended obligations.

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7. Staging Accessibility Work Over Time

Purpose	Normalize phased maturity
Takeaway	Accessibility evolves like other compliance efforts
Avoid	One-time framing

Once scope is understood, the next challenge teams face is sequencing. Accessibility is often treated as a one-time hurdle, something to "get through" so a deal can move forward. This framing creates unnecessary pressure and reinforces the idea that accessibility work must be completed all at once.

In enterprise environments, most trust and compliance efforts evolve in stages. Security programs mature over time. Documentation improves as processes stabilize. Evidence accumulates as ownership becomes clearer. Accessibility follows the same pattern.

Staging accessibility work allows teams to separate what must be credible now from **what can mature later**. Early stages typically focus on establishing awareness, ownership, and alignment between documentation and observable product behavior. Later stages expand coverage, refine processes, and address a broader set of scenarios as accessibility becomes more integrated into ongoing development.

For product and engineering leaders, this staged view changes the planning conversation. Instead of asking whether accessibility is “done,” teams can reason about which stage they are operating in and what level of effort is appropriate at that point. This makes accessibility comparable to other evolving requirements, rather than an exceptional case that demands immediate completeness.

Importantly, staging is not about deferring responsibility. It is about sequencing effort in a way that preserves delivery momentum while reducing risk. When accessibility work is staged intentionally, teams avoid the extremes of last-minute scrambles on one end and open-ended remediation initiatives on the other.

From a procurement perspective, staged maturity is familiar. Buyers routinely accept that vendors are at different points in their compliance and readiness lifecycle, as long as those positions are clearly articulated and internally consistent. Accessibility is no different in this respect.

The outcome of a staged approach is not speed for its own sake, but stability. Teams gain the ability to respond predictably as expectations evolve, without re-litigating scope or re-architecting plans each time accessibility is raised.

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8. What a Credible Initial Accessibility Signal Looks Like

Purpose	Define “good enough for now”
Takeaway	Coherence matters more than breadth
Avoid	Over-claiming

At the point accessibility first becomes visible in an enterprise deal, buyers are rarely looking for completeness. What they are assessing instead is whether

the company's accessibility posture is **coherent, defensible, and aligned with reality**.

A credible initial accessibility signal typically has a few consistent characteristics.

Component	Why It Matters
Bounded scope	Prevents misinterpretation
Ownership	Signals continuity
Consistency	Survives spot-checks
Non-final framing	Preserves flexibility

First, it is **bounded**. The scope being represented is clear, even if limited. Buyers can tell what the organization is describing and, just as importantly, what it is not. This prevents over-interpretation and reduces the risk of follow-up questions driven by ambiguity.

Second, it reflects **ownership**. There is an identifiable internal function or role accountable for accessibility, even if the underlying work is still maturing. Ownership signals intent and continuity, which matter more at this stage than depth of implementation.

Third, it is **internally consistent**. Written statements, responses to questionnaires, and observable product behavior tell the same story. Known gaps are not hidden, but framed accurately and proportionally. This alignment is especially important given that buyers may validate claims through limited spot-checks rather than full audits.

Fourth, it is **positioned as a starting point, not an endpoint**. A credible signal acknowledges that accessibility will evolve, without committing to timelines or over-promising future state. This allows buyers to place the vendor appropriately within their broader risk and readiness framework.

Notably, a credible initial signal does not require exhaustive remediation or broad coverage. In many cases, buyers are more comfortable with a

narrowly scoped but well-explained accessibility posture than with a broad set of claims that are difficult to substantiate.

For product and engineering teams, this framing is useful because it clarifies what “good enough for now” actually means in enterprise terms. The objective is not to appear finished, but to appear **intentional, consistent, and predictable** under scrutiny.

When these conditions are met, accessibility functions as a stabilizing signal in the procurement process rather than a source of ongoing uncertainty.

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9. Ownership, Accountability, and Internal Alignment

Purpose	Clarify responsibility
Takeaway	Ownership > expertise
Avoid	Org churn

In early stages, accessibility maturity is less about expertise and more about **ownership**. Enterprise buyers do not expect every organization to have deep accessibility specialization in place, but they do expect clarity around who is responsible for managing the topic.

Lack of ownership is often interpreted as unmanaged risk. When accessibility questions are passed between teams without a clear point of accountability, it creates uncertainty, even if the underlying product issues are minor. Conversely, clear ownership signals intent, continuity, and the ability to respond coherently over time.

For product and engineering organizations, this does not require the creation of new roles or organizational restructuring. What matters is that accessibility is treated as a shared responsibility with an identifiable coordinating function, rather than as an ad hoc task handled only when procurement asks.

Internal alignment also plays a role. Accessibility responses tend to be stronger when product, engineering, and non-technical stakeholders are operating from the same assumptions about scope, current state, and future direction. Misalignment between these groups is one of the most common sources of inconsistent messaging in enterprise reviews.

At this stage, ownership should be understood as a **stabilizing mechanism**, not an operational burden. It provides a single narrative thread across documentation, questionnaires, and follow-up discussions, reducing friction without increasing complexity.

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10. Evidence, Documentation, and Buyer-Facing Artifacts

Purpose	Frame documentation correctly
Takeaway	Coherence beats volume
Avoid	Parallel work streams

Procurement lens: How documentation is interpreted under time pressure.

In enterprise procurement processes, accessibility is often evaluated through documentation rather than direct interaction with the product. Buyers rely on written artifacts to form an initial assessment of risk, maturity, and alignment with internal requirements.

What matters most in these artifacts is not volume, but coherence. Buyers tend to look for consistency across materials: responses to questionnaires, formal statements, and any supporting documentation should reinforce the same scope, assumptions, and level of maturity.

At this stage, evidence is typically used to answer high-level questions:

- Is accessibility being taken seriously?

- Are claims internally consistent?
- Does the documentation reflect observable product behavior?

Detailed technical evidence is rarely expected early on. In many cases, overly detailed or overly broad documentation can introduce ambiguity, prompting follow-up questions that slow the process rather than accelerating it.

For teams, this reinforces an important principle: documentation is not a parallel track to product work. It is a representation of current reality, filtered for procurement audiences. When documentation and product behavior diverge, the gap tends to be more damaging than acknowledged limitations.

A small set of clear, well-aligned artifacts is usually more effective than a larger collection of loosely connected materials. Consistency across buyer-facing documentation is often interpreted as a proxy for internal alignment.

The specific artifact types buyers encounter, and how they are compared, are outlined in Appendix B.

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11. How This Evolves After the First Enterprise Ask

Purpose	Set expectations for maturity
Takeaway	Continuity matters
Avoid	Resetting from scratch

Procurement lens: How accessibility expectations compound over time.

The first time accessibility appears in an enterprise deal is rarely the last. As organizations continue to sell into regulated or risk-aware environments, accessibility expectations tend to evolve incrementally.

This evolution does not usually follow a rigid or linear path. Instead, it reflects a combination of buyer expectations, internal capacity, and product direction. Early stages focus on awareness and credibility; later stages expand

coverage and formalize processes as accessibility becomes more integrated into standard operations.

In enterprise contexts, **maturity is evaluated less by end state and more by continuity of reasoning over time**.

For product and engineering teams, this perspective helps avoid two extremes: assuming that early accessibility work permanently satisfies all future needs, or assuming that every new request requires a full re-evaluation from scratch. In practice, teams build on existing scope, documentation, and ownership as expectations grow.

Viewed this way, accessibility becomes part of an ongoing readiness posture rather than a one-off response. The emphasis shifts from "meeting the requirement" to maintaining consistency as requirements evolve.

Early stage signals:

- Awareness
- Ownership
- Coherent scope

Later stage signals:

- Expanded coverage
- Formalized processes
- Repeatable responses

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12. Being Ready Before Procurement Forces the Issue

Purpose	Close with posture
Takeaway	Readiness reduces disruption
Avoid	Last-minute framing

The most disruptive accessibility conversations tend to occur when teams are encountering the topic for the first time under deal pressure. In contrast, teams that have already established basic framing, scope, and ownership are able to respond with significantly less friction.

Preparation in this context does not mean doing extensive work in advance. It means understanding how accessibility fits into enterprise procurement dynamics, having a shared internal narrative, and knowing what level of signal is appropriate at a given stage.

When accessibility is treated as a known category, similar to other trust and compliance considerations, it becomes easier to reason about calmly. Teams spend less time interpreting the request and more time responding coherently.

The advantage of early readiness is not speed, but stability. It allows organizations to engage with accessibility requirements on their own terms, rather than reacting under compressed timelines and unclear expectations.

Reactive posture	**Prepared posture**
• Interpreting requests from scratch	• Recognizing the pattern
• Re-scoping under pressure	• Reusing established framing
• Over-correcting to reduce risk	• Responding proportionally

The appendices that follow provide concrete reference points for the artifacts, language, and evaluation patterns described throughout this playbook.

Appendices

Appendix A: Accessibility in the Context of Enterprise Risk and Compliance

In enterprise procurement, accessibility is evaluated alongside other trust and compliance signals rather than as a standalone product attribute. Buyers typically consider it in the same category as security posture, privacy commitments, and regulatory readiness.

While accessibility standards differ from security standards in form, the **evaluation logic** is similar.

Security teams have long understood that procurement does not ask whether a system is perfectly secure. Instead, buyers look for signals that risk is understood, categorized, and actively managed. Accessibility follows this same pattern.

Across enterprise reviews, accessibility is often assessed implicitly along a small number of risk dimensions:

Risk Dimension	How Buyers Think
Core flow blocking	High risk
Known gaps	Managed risk
Cosmetic issues	Low impact
Ability to explain tradeoffs	Signals judgment and risk ownership

This mirrors how security vulnerabilities are commonly discussed, not as a binary pass/fail outcome, but as a set of known, mitigated, accepted, or low-impact risks.

Importantly, procurement teams do not expect the absence of all accessibility issues, just as they do not expect the absence of all security findings. What they expect is **clarity**: which issues matter, which are understood, and how the organization reasons about them.

Accessibility challenges that materially block core functionality tend to be treated as higher risk. Issues that are known, documented, or limited in scope are often viewed differently, particularly when they do not affect primary product workflows. Cosmetic or edge-case issues rarely dominate early procurement decisions when properly contextualized.

For software teams, this framing helps explain why accessibility discussions often focus less on technical depth and more on **judgment, prioritization, and credibility**. Buyers are evaluating how accessibility risk is managed, not whether it has been eliminated entirely.

Seen in this light, accessibility behaves like other enterprise compliance signals: a measure of organizational readiness rather than a test of product perfection.

Appendix B: Typical Accessibility Artifacts Seen in Enterprise Deals

In enterprise procurement processes, accessibility is rarely evaluated through deep technical review. Instead, buyers encounter accessibility through a small number of **repeatable artifact types** that surface across legal, procurement, and trust workflows.

The table below summarizes the most common artifacts teams encounter and what those artifacts typically signal to enterprise buyers.

Artifact Type	**How Buyers Typically Use It**
VPAT / VPAT-Style Summary	Comparative signal across vendors; scanned for scope clarity, internal consistency, and alignment with observable product behavior.
Procurement or Security Questionnaire Responses	Trust and consistency check across compliance domains; mismatches or evasive answers raise concern more than acknowledged gaps.
Deal-Specific Accessibility Summary	Contextual clarification for a specific buyer or deal; evaluated on coherence with current product state and stated scope.
Legal or Contractual Accessibility Language	Risk and defensibility signal; overly broad claims increase perceived risk, while scoped language is seen as more credible.
Cross-Artifact Alignment	Proxy for ownership and maturity; consistency across materials is often weighted more heavily than any single document.

Across these artifacts, buyers are not assessing accessibility in isolation. They are evaluating whether the organization can present a **consistent, defensible accessibility posture** across the materials that naturally arise during enterprise procurement.

In practice, fewer well-aligned artifacts tend to perform better than a larger set of loosely connected documents. Coherence across artifacts is commonly interpreted as a signal of ownership, judgment, and readiness.

Appendix C: Language and Terms Buyers Commonly Use

Accessibility requests in enterprise contexts are often phrased using standardized language drawn from internal procurement, legal, or regulatory frameworks. These terms are typically used as **shorthand** rather than as precise technical instructions.

For teams, interpreting this language correctly is less about mastering terminology and more about understanding **what the buyer is actually trying to assess**. In most cases, these terms signal a request for clarity, ownership, and risk awareness, not immediate technical depth or exhaustive remediation.

The terms below frequently appear alongside the artifact types described in Appendix B. Understanding how they are typically used helps teams respond proportionally and avoid misinterpreting intent.

VPAT (Voluntary Product Accessibility Template)

Often used as a catch-all request for an accessibility response.

In practice, a VPAT request usually signals that the buyer wants a **standardized, comparable summary** of accessibility posture. It is rarely treated as self-verifying and is often reviewed relative to other vendors' responses for coherence, scope, and credibility rather than technical completeness.

Section 508 Compliance

Common in public-sector and regulated enterprise deals.

Formally, Section 508 references **WCAG conformance** as the underlying technical standard. In procurement contexts, however, the term is often used as a **policy-level requirement** rather than as a request for immediate, exhaustive technical proof.

Buyers using this language are typically assessing whether accessibility has been acknowledged, scoped, and addressed in a structured, defensible way, consistent with how other formal compliance obligations are managed, with the expectation that WCAG alignment exists or is being approached intentionally.

WCAG Conformance / Conformance Level (e.g., A, AA)

Frequently referenced as a benchmark or expectation.

In procurement contexts, WCAG is often used as a **reference framework**, not a literal checklist. Buyers rarely expect exhaustive coverage at early stages; instead, they look for alignment between stated scope, documented claims, and observable product behavior. Declared conformance levels are generally interpreted as indicators of maturity, not absolute acceptance thresholds.

Assistive Technology Support

Often phrased broadly or without specificity.

This language typically signals concern about **core usability**, not edge-case compatibility. Buyers asking about assistive technology are usually focused on whether primary workflows are accessible in representative scenarios, rather than on comprehensive support across all tools and configurations.

Remediation Plan / Accessibility Roadmap

Sometimes requested as a follow-up.

When buyers ask about remediation plans, they are usually assessing whether future accessibility work is **intentional, owned, and sequenced**, not asking for fixed timelines or exhaustive commitments. Clear boundaries and credible staging tend to carry more weight than aggressive promises.

Closing Note

Across these terms, the underlying signal is consistent: buyers are trying to determine whether accessibility is **understood, owned, and managed with judgment**. Treating these requests as intent signals, rather than literal technical instructions, helps teams respond calmly, proportionally, and credibly in enterprise procurement contexts.

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