Transcript Patrick Turnage Interview (Part 2)

ROD BERGER: Companies are starting to venture into assistive technology with the goal of creating products that are sort of baked in or foundational in universal design, what do they need to know when it comes to requirements?

I think one of the things that make vendors a bit nervous is the data component and the supportive piece regarding professional development and training so that educators are brought up to speed on how to fully use the application that they are providing.

What should they know when it comes to data requirements when we think about populations that you are working with quite closely?

PATRICK TURNAGE: The nice thing about the companies that are doing development is that if they follow the standards related to universal design principles and if they look at the specific standards for compatibility with assistive technology such as Fiber 8 or WCAG, if they look at those standards and they build their product to those standards, then they are going to work with assistive technology.

Now, what I think they need to know is that it's always critical to do user-focused testing and to make sure that your test group — not just with disabilities — represents the full spectrum of your audience.

So make sure that you do have people using assistive technologies testing out your product. We see this a lot with some of the operating system vendors. Having the public beta inside their program, for example, for Microsoft — all of these pathways to beta testing where the public provides that feedback but definitely the user-focused testing to make sure that, "Yes, we looked at the accessibility checker. We followed all the standards. We think we know what we're doing. We think we've designed a product that is compatible and meets all these standards and principles of universal design. And, now, we need a user group to test and evaluate."

That's no different than having a user-focused group to test that interface design or any other parts of it. It's universal design. So just having a diverse user testing group that is focused on providing high-quality feedback would allow them to collect the data they need.

RB: Let's close with this, Patrick. As we look at technologies of all shapes and sizes to support students of all shapes and sizes and abilities and backgrounds with, I would guess, the ultimate goal is to support some level of readiness for what's next after their K-12 journey.

How do you wrestle with that and are the technologies assistive on the bridge between public education and the big "what's next?" for young people?

PT: Absolutely! I think that's one of the unique things with myself and some of our other staff here at Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind. We are building skills today for things that our students will encounter tomorrow or after K-12 education.

A lot of our kids are going to go to college so we need to prepare them for that. We even look at their technology and teach them fundamental skills for critical thinking and self-advocacy so they understand what they need and they have the critical thinking skills to develop.

We can't teach them every technology that's going to be out in the next ten years or even five years so we have to teach them the building blocks and give them the tools to ensure that they have the critical thinking so they can look at an application or an interface or a piece of assistive technology or even just a new device, a new thing that we haven't even imagined yet to give them the critical thinking skills to ask "What will happen if I do this? What will happen if I do that?"

And those skills do translate. So, yes, we can look at public education as far as having them access curriculum and teaching the technologies that they need just like anybody else who learns how to use an office product or a web browser or an email client.

All of those things are skills that translate. You're teaching them how to use Google docs or Gmail or G-Suite at the K-12 level but you know that when they get out, they might be on a different platform; but it's still those foundational skills.

We're very cognizant of the foundational skills that we're trying to teach and, as I've said, the critical thinking and self-advocacy so that they not only can learn how to use technologies on their own and adapt to changing situations but they are fully aware and able to explain to others what their needs are and the best ways that technologies are going to meet their needs today and in the future.

RB: I sincerely hope that the assistive technology community has a seat at the proverbial table because the way in which you approach it and the challenges that you're able to overcome with understanding technology's role within education, I think, benefits all, to your earlier point about universal design. And I think that you presenting at FETC — I know you're part of the Inclusion & Special Education track as a featured speaker. I really hope that people take notice because you've got a very valuable voice in this discussion.

I wish you the best and I look forward to meeting you in person in Miami. Thanks so much, Patrick.

PT: Thank you. I'm looking forward to it. Again, I just want to say that assistive technology players and people who use assistive technology have a larger seat at the table today than we've ever had in the past.

That's a wonderful thing. As I've said, that companies are starting to recognize that. They are definitely recognizing that. We have a bigger voice and I'm glad that I'm presenting at FETC

because I'm looking forward to sharing that voice and those viewpoints with people who are going to be stopping by my presentation.

So I'm looking forward to meeting people who are listening to this and who will maybe come to the presentation and hear about virtual assistance and how we're using new and emerging technology in the classroom to allow students to speak and use their own voice to learn information and obtain information and gather data.

So thank you so much.

RB: You're most welcome and I look forward to meeting you in Miami. Thanks so much, Patrick.

PT: Thank you.