eRecruiting & Accessibility: Is HR Technology Hurting Your Bottom Line?

A Report on PEAT's 2015 Research Findings

TalentWorks

Helping Employers Make Their eRecruiting Tools Accessible.

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ABOUT PEAT

The Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT) is a multi-faceted initiative promoting the employment, retention, and career advancement of people with disabilities through the development, adoption, and promotion of accessible technology. PEAT is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy and is managed by the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA). Guided by a consortium of policy and technology leaders, PEAT is the only entity of its kind that brings together employers, technology providers, thought leaders, and technology users around the intersecting topics of accessible technology and employment. To find out more, visit PEATworks.org.

PEAT'S RESEARCH ON eRECRUITING: THE WHY & HOW

TALENT RECRUITMENT TODAY

In today's world, eRecruiting tools rule. Also known as "online recruiting," eRecruiting refers to the practice of using technology — in particular, web-based resources — for tasks involved with finding, attracting, assessing, interviewing, and hiring new personnel. And eRecruiting is, indeed, everywhere. Employers are using online tools to recruit, organize, and follow up with job applicants. Gone are the days when someone faxed in their resume with a cover letter or stopped by in person to complete an application the old-fashioned way — with a pen. The human resources (HR) software applications and talent management systems that today's employers use are designed to do it all — sort and organize applicants based on key word scanning, highlight the top picks, set up video interviews, document follow-up, and print out all kinds of reports.

And yet, the age-old problem of finding top talent still persists. Despite all of the advances in technology, employers are still having trouble filling positions. Of course, there are a number of reasons why finding talent is so difficult. But what if one factor boiled down to a fundamental problem with the technology tools employers are using? What if top talent is falling through the cracks due to accessibility issues, rather than a lack of qualifications?

After hearing complaints from both sides — employers and job seekers alike — the Partnership on Employment & Accessible Technology (PEAT) set out to conduct a survey of people with varying disabilities about their experiences using eRecruiting tools. The goal was to learn how frequently job seekers with disabilities are using these tools, and whether they encountered any difficulties or obstacles in applying for jobs.

What if top talent is falling through the cracks due to accessibility issues, rather than a lack of qualifications?

HOW PEAT BEGAN ITS RESEARCH

As an initiative designed to promote accessible technology in the workplace and advance the employment of people with disabilities, the PEAT team quickly realized that eRecruiting tools were a major source of concern among our stakeholders. So our team members researched the top HR technology companies offering these tools, and conducted one-on-one interviews with more than two dozen technology providers, employers, accessible technology consultants, disability advocates, and other experts in the business, disability, and accessibility fields. These efforts pinpointed a number of accessibility factors affecting employers, technology providers, and job seekers with disabilities.

"Accessibility" in this context refers to technology products and environments that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible – regardless of disabilities or functional limitations — without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

TOP ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN OUR INTERVIEWS

According to the individuals PEAT interviewed, the top accessibility issues identified were the following:

- Awareness – Those we interviewed said that employers and technology providers tend to underestimate the need for accessible online job applications.
- Compliance vs. usability mindset – According to those we interviewed, there is an overarching belief among many employers and technology providers that if a website complies with the Section 508[1] guidelines, then it meets the needs of all users. In other words, accessibility is about compliance, not usability. But just because a technology is compliant does not necessarily mean it is intuitive and user-friendly.
- Technology, logistics, and cost –Those we interviewed believed that technical solutions for the most common accessibility issues already existed; however, many thought those solutions would be expensive and difficult to implement.
- Complexity – Those we interviewed said that employers often fail to look at the big picture and consider accessibility challenges beyond the job application form itself, including processes related to job sourcing, pre-employment testing, and digital interviews. Additionally, they may not consider how the application integrates with the overall corporate website, which may have accessibility issues.
- Customization – While an adopted, off-the-shelf technology platform may be accessible in its basic form, built-in accessibility features are sometimes lost when vendors customize and install a tailor-made application.
- Inadequate testing – Technology providers and consultants suggested that employers rarely tested their online job application software with actual users prior to launch.

1 Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, (generally referred to just as "Section 508") requires that federal agencies make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. The U.S. Access Board maintains Section 508 Standards, which contain technical criteria specific to various types of technologies and performance-based requirements for covered technology products.

FOLLOW-ON SURVEY OF JOB SEEKERS WITH DISABILITIES

After learning from employers, IT providers, and developers and advocacy organizations, PEAT set out to conduct a survey of people with varying disabilities about their experiences using eRecruiting tools. The goal was to learn how frequently job seekers with disabilities are using these tools, and whether they encounter any difficulties or obstacles in applying for jobs.

Based on interview insights, the PEAT team developed a 17-question online survey for people with varying disabilities about their experiences searching for jobs online, submitting applications, and completing pre-employment testing. The purpose of the survey was to establish a baseline of the issues faced by job seekers with disabilities when applying for jobs online.

PEAT promoted the survey at conferences and meetings, through social media, through direct contact with disability advocacy groups, and on the PEAT website from August 2014 until July 2015. Overall, 427 people with disabilities responded. The types of disabilities, as self-reported by the respondents, were as follows:

- 10% identified as being blind or having a visual impairment;
- 26% identified as being deaf or hard of hearing;
- 21% identified as having physical and/or motor disabilities;
- 29% identified as having cognitive and/or intellectual disabilities; and
- 14% identified as "other" or declined to state their disability.

PEAT's survey is the first survey conducted about the online job application process to include a cross-section of people with disabilities. This report summarizes the qualitative and quantitative results; however, they cannot necessarily be generalized to the larger population due to the survey's small sample size.

MAJOR SURVEY FINDINGS

Key findings from PEAT's survey include the following:

- 82% of all respondents have applied for a job online or assisted someone with applying for a job online within the past three years.
- 46% rated their last experience applying for a job online as "difficult to impossible." Of those, 9% were unable to complete the application and 24% required assistance from the employer maintaining the application.

46% rated their last experience applying for a job online as "difficult to impossible."

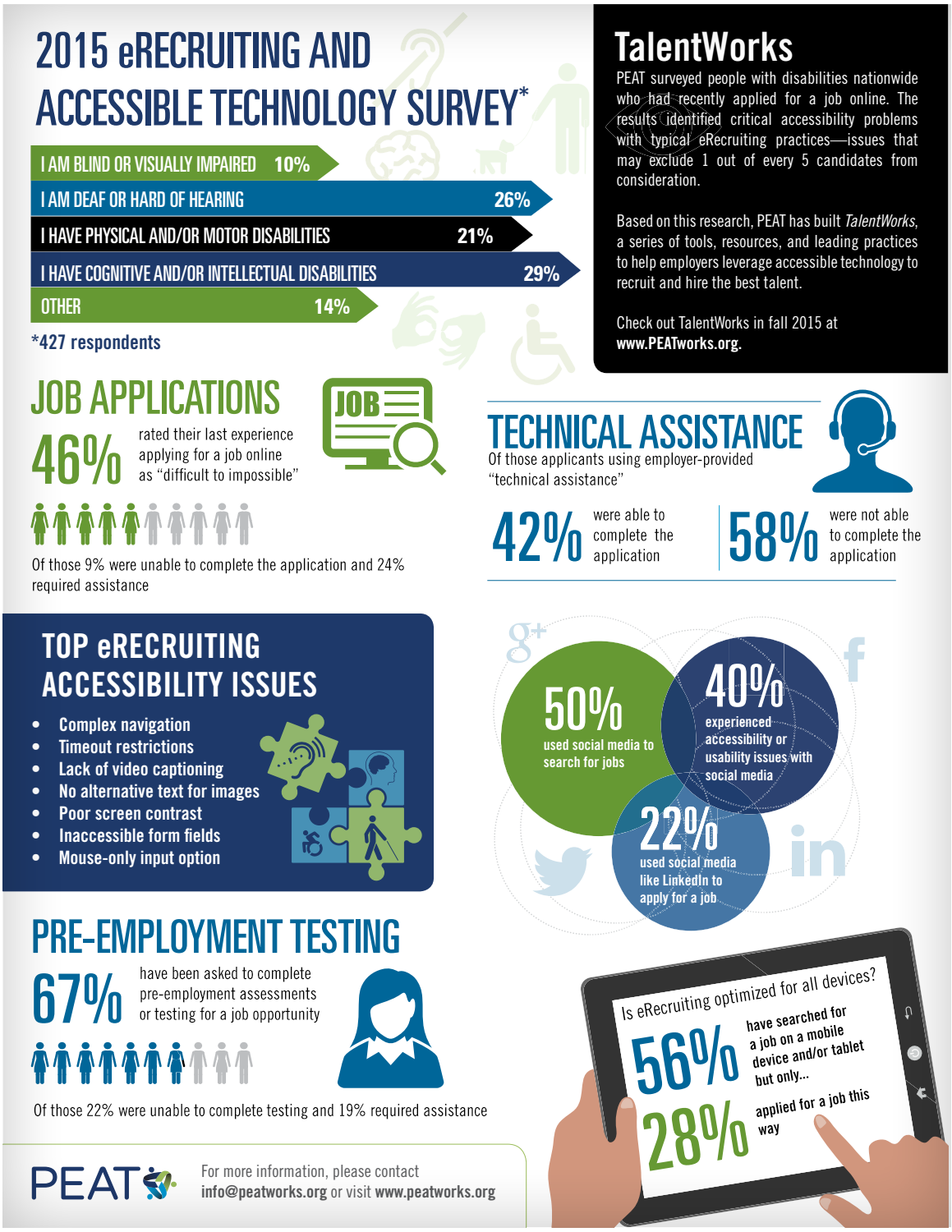
- Of those applicants who required assistance from the employer, 58% were still unable to finish the application.
- 67% have been asked to complete pre-employment assessments or testing for a job opportunity. Of those, 22% were unable to complete testing and 19% required assistance.
- 50% of respondents have used social media as part of their job search process; of those, 40% experienced accessibility or usability issues, such as features they could not access at all or that were not user-friendly.

The survey asked respondents to describe the difficulties they had faced in the job application process. The top issues they reported were:

- Complex navigation;
- Timeout restrictions;
- Poor screen contrast;
- Confusing, poorly written, and inconsistent instructions;
- Fields that did not state an accepted format (such as date fields) and fields that were mislabeled or not labeled at all, rendering them inaccessible;
- Applications and questionnaires that relied on color, graphics, or text embedded with graphics to convey directions or important information;
- Images that conveyed information, but did not have alternative text for individuals using screen readers;
- Applications that could not be navigated with keystrokes and required mouse input;
- Applications that had to be signed using a mouse;
- Videos or audio instructions that were not closed captioned;
- Inaccessible “CAPTCHAs“ (a type of “challenge-response” test used in computing to determine whether or not the user is human) with no audio option;
- Trouble uploading the necessary documents;
- No notice about use of pop-up windows, which are blocked by most browsers in many settings, such as libraries and employment centers;
- Lack of contact information for technical support; and
- Lack of information on how to request an accommodation.

Despite the fact that respondents reported different accessibility needs, there were also some universal barriers. For example, everyone surveyed reported having trouble with applications that timed out before they were able to finish a task.

PEAT has developed the following infographic to visually showcase these major findings.



Fixing accessibility issues helps everyone. Think of closed captioning, curb cuts, and voice recognition — technologies initially created for people with disabilities and now used by everyone.

WHAT IT ALL MEANS FOR EMPLOYERS

46% of survey respondents rated their last experience of applying for a job online as "difficult to impossible."

That statistic should stop employers and HR professionals in their tracks. Just think about it — if almost half of all customers rated their experience with a business as "difficult to impossible," that business would be in serious trouble. Customers would begin to go elsewhere. Well, that same logic applies to talented job seekers, who will also search elsewhere if they encounter inaccessible eRecruiting technologies. With employment rebounding in today's economy, the competition to attract talent is more competitive than ever. It is particularly competitive for small employers, who may not be able offer many perks and who overwhelmingly rely on ready-made or "off-the-shelf" technology products for their human resource needs.

In addition to employers missing out on potentially great candidates, inaccessible online job applications, websites, social media job posts, mobile apps, and pre-employment testing systems also reflect badly on companies and their brands. They affect the ability of people with disabilities to apply for positions, and they can also lead to expensive employment discrimination lawsuits.

People with disabilities are not the only ones affected. Findings from a 2014 survey conducted by the recruitment technology company Jibe and the research firm Kelton Global showed that "the present state of online job applications disappoints and even discourages the majority of candidates."[2] According to this research, 60% of the respondents reported they would be deterred from submitting a job application due to technology-related hurdles.

Confusing instructions on a website, an account sign-up that is difficult to navigate, document upload tools that "time out" without warning — these issues affect all applicants, not just people with disabilities. Fixing accessibility issues helps everyone. Think of closed captioning, curb cuts, and voice recognition — technologies initially created for people with disabilities and now used by everyone.

So the key take-away is that recognizing and fixing online eRecruiting tools' accessibility issues will result in a stronger pipeline for top talent, which means more and better qualified candidates overall.

2 Fallon, Nicole; "Online Job Applications are Turning Candidates Off," Business News Daily, October 6, 2014; http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/7238-on-line-job-application-pains.html.

FINDINGS BY eRECRUITING CATEGORY

PEAT's survey results pointed to accessibility issues in several categories of eRecruiting: Job search/sourcing tools, online job applications, and pre-employment testing.

JOB SEARCH/SOURCING TOOLS

Social Media

As every HR professional knows, social media is now a vital method for promoting job openings. Most career centers and job boards auto-tweet new job postings to their subscribers. Employers also routinely post job openings on their Facebook pages and through LinkedIn.

PEAT's survey respondents confirmed social media's important role in eRecruiting:

- 50% have used social media to search for jobs;
- 40% experienced accessibility or usability issues with social media; and
- 22% used social media sites, such as LinkedIn, to apply for a job.

However, accessibility issues associated with social media platforms can prevent certain users with disabilities from reading employment-related posts in the first place. The most common accessibility problems cited by PEAT's survey respondents were:

- Use of images or videos to convey information that did not use alternative text or closed captioning;
- Links that don't work, or take the user to a different place than what was described; and
- Inability to use screen readers or other assistive technology tools with social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Mobile Devices

Mobile devices such as tablets and smart phones now account for an increasing amount of web traffic, and their widespread use means they are a key factor in the eRecruiting world. No longer can employers assume that job seekers are viewing job postings in a desktop environment. PEAT's survey showed that:

- 56% of respondents have searched for a job on a mobile device and/or tablet; and
- 28% have actually applied for a job using a mobile device and/or tablet.

The most commonly cited mobile accessibility problems were:

- Job applications that are too long and complex to complete on a mobile device;
- Timeout restrictions;
- Poor screen contrast;
- Difficulty typing in all of the fields;
- Small print;
- Following links to a webpage that is not mobile friendly;
- Problems with pages loading (connectivity issues); and
- Difficulty uploading documents.

ONLINE JOB APPLICATIONS

The key element of most eRecruiting software is the online job application. And, of course, it is imperative that job seekers be able to navigate and successfully complete such applications. If candidates cannot apply for open positions, then employers cannot consider them. And as a result, they'll miss out on potential talent. In addition, if online job applications are not accessible to people with disabilities, then the businesses behind them could be vulnerable to expensive legal challenges.

As mentioned previously, PEAT's survey found that most respondents (82%) had applied for a job online within the past three years, with 46% rating their experience as "difficult to impossible." Of those, 9% were unable to complete the application and 24% required assistance. Further, 64% reported being unaware or unable to find technical assistance information on the site. Of those applicants using employer-provided technical assistance, 58% were still unable to finish the application. So the message is clear — if technical assistance is hard to find or access, or if it still doesn't lead to a successful application submission after it's provided, then there is definitely a problem.

As discussed in our Findings section, survey respondents also noted many accessibility and usability issues they have encountered when using online job applications, such as complex navigation, timeout restrictions, poor screen contrast, poorly written instructions, mouse-only navigation, and more.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TESTING

Employers now engage in all kinds of pre-employment testing, from basic skills tests (such as typing) to personality questionnaires. Of PEAT's survey respondents, 67% have been asked to complete pre-employment assessments or testing for a job opportunity. Of those, 22% were unable to complete testing and 19% required assistance.

Common accessibility issues associated with pre-employment testing were similar to those linked with online job applications. They include:

- Complex navigation;
- Timeout restrictions;
- Poor screen contrast;
- Confusing, poorly written, and inconsistent instructions;
- Questionnaires that rely on color, graphics, or text embedded with graphics to convey directions or important information;
- Images that convey information, but do not have alternative text that can be read by screen readers;
- Videos or audio instructions that are not closed captioned;
- Forms that were not compatible with assistive technology, such as screen readers; and
- Forms that did not allow users to input information with a keyboard instead of a mouse.

Common accessibility issues associated with pre-employment testing were similar to those linked with online job applications.

PEAT TalentWorks

So now that we know a little more about the technology barriers job seekers are facing, what can we all do about it? The results of our research helped confirm the need for more employer support and education related to accessible eRecruiting tools. So in response, PEAT has developed TalentWorks, an online resource that helps employers and HR professionals make their eRecruiting technologies accessible to all job seekers.

TalentWorks synthesizes the information gathered from PEAT's interviews, surveys, and outreach sessions into an ever-evolving online tool. It addresses the issues discussed in this report, providing specific solutions that will help employers improve the accessibility of their talent sourcing tools, job applications, pre-employment testing apps, and more.

We encourage you to explore TalentWorks and engage in conversations with fellow employers and IT providers. Please also take the opportunity to share your experiences, ideas, and leading practices for ensuring the accessibility of eRecruiting tools.

APPENDIX

In 2014-2015, PEAT conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with technology providers, employers, accessible technology consultants, disability advocates, and other experts on issues related to the accessibility of eRecruiting tools. PEAT also conducted a national survey of technology users with disabilities related to their online job-seeking experiences. Interview and survey questions posed during these research exercises appear below:

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Sample Questions Used in Interviews with Technology Providers, Employers, Accessible Technology Consultants and Additional Experts:

- What is the biggest barrier to creating online job applications that are accessible to all users?
- What is your organization's/client's typical approach to accessibility in the development process?
- What factors do you think prevent accessibility from being more of a priority? Is it technology, policy, and/or awareness?
- Do you know of any relevant research in this area that we should be aware of?
- Are there additional experts that you recommend we get in touch with to discuss this issue?

Sample Questions for Disability Advocacy Organizations:

- What is your organization currently doing in the area of employment, particularly as it relates to job seeking?
- What are the biggest challenges you are witnessing/hearing about from your community regarding completing online job applications?
- What factors do you think prevent accessibility from being more of a priority among employers and technology providers? Is it technology, policy, and/or awareness?
- Do you know of any relevant research in this area that we should be aware of?
- Are there additional experts that you recommend we get in touch with to discuss this issue?

NATIONAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT QUESTIONS

1. **To help us ensure we receive feedback from multiple user groups, please check all that apply to you:**
   a. I am blind or visually impaired
   b. I am deaf or hard of hearing
   c. I have physical and/or motor disabilities
   d. I have cognitive and/or intellectual disabilities
   e. I do not wish to self-identify
   f. Not applicable
   g. I have another disability as follows (please specify):

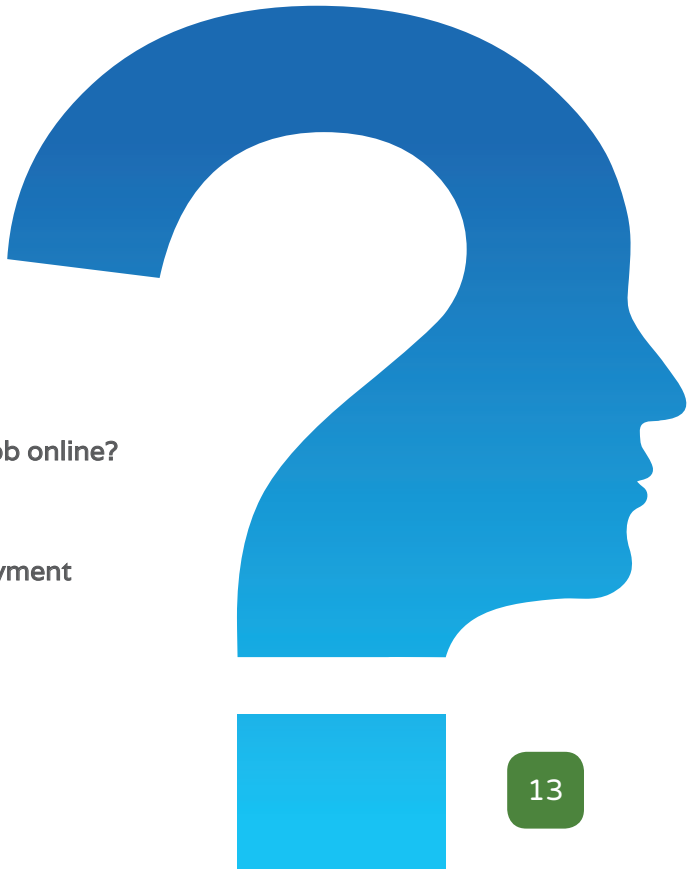
2. **If you were applying for a job today, what would be your preferred method? Please rank the options below by entering the numbers 1 through 4 in the text boxes according to your preference, with 1 being the most preferable and 4 being the least preferred.**
   a. Desktop/laptop computer
   b. Smartphone
   c. Tablet
   d. Paper form

3. **Where do you prefer to apply for a job? Please rank the options below by entering the numbers 1 through 4 in the text boxes according to your preference.**
   a. At home
   b. At a potential employer site
   c. At a career center
   d. At a library/community center

4. **Have you done any of the following actions in the past 3 years? Applied for a job using an online application. Assisted another person with applying for a job online.**
   a. Yes
   b. No

5 **What difficulties did you encounter when applying for a job online? Please type your response in the box below.**

6. **Have you ever been asked to complete online pre-employment assessments or testing for a job opportunity?**



Please select one answer below.

a. Yes

b. No

c. Not sure

7. **What difficulties did you encounter when completing pre-employment testing online? Please type your response in the box below.**

8. **Have you ever used social media as part of your job search process? Please select the responses that apply and type the social media networks used in the box below.**

   a. Yes, to find job opportunities.

   b. Yes, to apply for a job (like through LinkedIn)

   c. No

   d. Please list what social media you have used in your job search, if applicable (ex: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter)

9. **Have you experienced accessibility or usability issues when using social media to search for or apply for jobs? If so, please list the key issues in the text box below after selecting "yes."**

   a. Yes

   b. No

   c. Please describe key issues and the social media platform used.

10. **Have you searched for or applied to jobs using your mobile device or tablet? Please select the response or responses below that apply to your experience.**

    a. Yes, I have searched for jobs using a mobile device and/or tablet

    b. Yes, I have applied for jobs using a mobile device and/or tablet

    c. No, I have not used a mobile device/tablet in my job search

11. **Describe your experience using a mobile or tablet device to apply or look for a job. What worked well and what could have been improved? Please type your response in the box below.**

12. **For the last job you attempted to apply for online, did you complete the application? Please select the appropriate response below.**

    a. Yes, without assistance

    b. Yes, with assistance

    c. No

    d. Not applicable

13. **For the last pre-employment assessment/testing you were asked to complete online, were you able to complete it? Please select the appropriate response below.**
    a. Yes, without assistance
    b. Yes, with assistance
    c. No

14. **For the last online job application you completed, were you aware of any technical assistance help on the site? Please select the appropriate response below.**
    a. Yes, and I used it
    b. Yes, but I did not use it
    c. No

15. **If you used technical assistance, did you receive the help you needed to complete the application or pre-employment test? Please select the appropriate response below.**
    a. Yes, the technical assistance helped me complete the task
    b. No, the technical assistance did not help me complete the task

16. **From "unable to complete" to "very easy to complete," how would you rate the user-friendliness of the last online job application you completed or attempted to complete? Please select one option below.**
    a. Unable to complete
    b. Difficult to complete
    c. Not difficult/neutral
    d. Easy to complete
    e. Very easy to complete
    f. N/A

17. **Do you have any additional feedback or thoughts about improving the accessibility of the online job seeking process? Please type your thoughts in the box below.**

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