



Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility

*Gattard House,
National Road,
Blata l-Bajda
HMR02
Malta*

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Introduction

Employment related disadvantage can be experienced on two levels. The first includes access to employment, demonstrated by such indicators as labour force participation rates, unemployment rates and rates of representation in different occupations and sectors of the economy. The second level relates to those who gain employment and is demonstrated by indicators such as income levels, occupational concentration and segregation, rates of promotion, turnover, harassment and other negative experiences in the workplace.

The right not to be discriminated against has to be complimented with the right to benefit from measures designed to ensure the independence, integration, and participation in the life of the community. One key requirement for this, is dignified employment.

The following key priorities cover areas that we believe need to be addressed. The Foundation does not infer that nothing is being done to address these issues, and neither that enough is being done.

Key priorities in relation to the labour market integration of disabled persons:

1. Access to ICT, both as a medium or tool, employed within an educational or work environment and as a profession in itself.

Increased office skills and ICT skills can increase drastically the employability of a number of significant disabled persons. Home working/tele-working and flexible hours are amongst the possibilities, that can help circumvent the prohibitive constraints imposed by the traditional working hours and job requirements, whilst allowing the employee to be equally productive. Similar measures contribute towards fostering equal employment opportunities for disabled persons

2. Access to education and training, focusing on the use of ICT as a means to overcome the difficulties an individual might have.

Access to education and training should be ensured, in terms of mobility (physical accessibility and transport) and also in terms of the choice of mediums used for knowledge transfer. In this regard, proper use and implementation of ICT holds great promise for disabled persons, who wish to maximise their abilities, integrate themselves within society and live more independently. Online training courses, computer based training, and

educational software are amongst the possibilities which can promote the inclusion of disabled persons who for varied reasons might not benefit fully from other forms of education or training,

3. Ensuring access to information communications technology, as a means to participating fully in e-society at an equal level to others.

In our promotion of the use of ICT the Foundation stresses the term proper implementation, since the inadvertent adoption of technological solutions, without prior knowledge or insight about the requirements of different user groups, is bound to bring about barriers to information access, which are usually costly to rectify at later stages within a project.

As an example the recent push towards Web-based distance learning has brought with it a promise of "anywhere" and "anytime," and often includes a companion promise -- stated or implicit -- of being "for anyone." However, the fast-paced usage and implementation of the Web has the potential to exclude disabled persons who may benefit from Web-based distance learning. A lack of awareness on the part of developers on how online resources are used by disabled persons (especially persons with a visual impairment) has contributed to increased resources without increased access.

Recent measures to promote labour market integration of disabled persons:

In its endeavours, FITA constantly seeks to maximise the use of existing resources, through the synergy created by working with other organisations and acting as a catalyst for the creation of new initiatives.

1. Since its inception in 2002, FITA has successfully organised a number of ICT training courses in collaboration with MCAST. The main target groups for these courses are persons with an intellectual impairment and persons with communication difficulties. So far these were introductory courses, providing computer awareness, and covering areas like use of MS Word, Internet browsing and Email. FITA is presently working with other organisations in order to organise ECDL and Web Design courses.
2. FITA holds ongoing ICT training courses for persons with a visual impairment. These courses cover basic ICT awareness and computer based office skills, including use of the Web and email.
3. The Foundation is assisting the Education Division in providing access to persons with a visual impairment for ECDL courses. There are also plans for additional evening courses on ICT awareness for persons with an intellectual disability and a Maltese literacy course for deaf persons. FITA is also collaborating with the Ministry for Social Policy and the Richmond Foundation in the running of an ICT course for persons with mental health difficulties.

4. FITA participated in media programmes (radio and television), highlighting the benefits of ICT across a range of impairment groups. Backed by sponsorship from a number of local companies and the Ministry for IT and Investments, FITA is also creating an information video, promoting the use of ICT as a means of improving the quality of life of disabled persons.
5. The Foundation's services portfolio, includes a resource centre and a consultancy service. We collaborate with local organisations, in the provision of proper accommodation required by the Equal Opportunities Act (2000) and retraining for existing employees who have become disabled. These services, are also available to employers and disabled persons seeking employment.
6. The Foundation also makes recommendations on applications by disabled persons, who require financial assistance in order to acquire ICT or assistive technology, as a means to assist them in their education and employment.

Planned measures to promote labour market integration of disabled persons:

1. Increased access to education via the promotion and equitable accreditation of online courses. The Foundation has plans to collaborate with the Swatar Training Centre and other organisations on this initiative.
2. Increased awareness of assistive technology solutions and their availability to promote the participation of disabled persons within an educational and work environment at par with peers and colleagues.
3. Where applicable FITA deploys disabled persons who volunteer to offer support, within different areas of its operations. Examples, include the creation of Life Skills presentations by a person who has autism and the delivery of ICT training by persons with visual impairments.
4. FITA has sought involvement within a Leonardo da Vinci project promoting entrepreneurship, with a view to ensure the accessibility of research material generated by this project, and also its use by disabled persons.
5. FITA is planning to collaborate with other organisations in the creation of summer courses focusing on cross-curriculum knowledge and the delivery of ICT-Skills for secondary school children.

Measures we would like to see implemented

1. Presently business organisations receive a financial incentive covering part of the employee's salary or wage when they employ a disabled person. Wherever applicable, the Foundation suggests that the business organisation, the individual involved and possibly the ETC, make the provision of assistive technology a priority. This combined commitment would constitute a tangible investment in the person's abilities. It also permits the disabled person to be

more productive and less dependent on specific job conditions, or the support of co-workers.

2. Trade Unions should further examine disability issues concerning their members, develop equal opportunity policies in this area and integrate these policies in their collective agreements.