

General overview of FITA's activities in 2008

Background

In 2008, FITA continued to its role as the Maltese Government's principal advocate and coordinator for making information technology accessible for disabled people, by continuing to support past initiatives whilst focusing on research and development activities that will lead to greater access to education and employment via Information Communications Technology (ICT).

This role was consolidated by an agreement reached in March 2008, whereby FITA partnered with the Ministry for Infrastructure, Transport and Communications (MITC) in order to work on Stream 2 of the National ICT Strategy 2008-2010.

Over the last decade, Government has strived to harness the potential of ICT and translate it into benefits for Maltese society and the economy. To this end FITA works actively together with the Employment Training Corporation (ETC), the Education Division, MCAST and business partners in order to address the digital divide in its various forms.

These difficulties are being addressed by FITA on three separate levels.

1. Access to hardware
2. Access to services
3. Access to know how

Access to hardware

FITA's principle function is to provide support to disabled individuals in overcoming or removing barriers to education and employment. FITA consultancy and information services assist disabled individuals in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology, intended to increase, maintain, or improve the individual's quality of life. Closely linked to this service, the National Commission Disabled Persons provides financial assistance for disabled persons when purchasing such equipment.

FITA also provides assistance for the purchase of equipment through the Malta Community Chest Fund and its Computer Refurbishment workshop at the PHRF in Paola.

Such assistive technology devices include any piece of equipment, or software, specifically intended to help disabled individuals to improve their quality of life, gain access to education and improve their skills, obtain employment and become more financially independent.

FITA is participating in a 7th Framework Programme project which will enable it to increase its know how in the realm of computer hardware accessibility. Through this project, entitled TACMON, FITA partnered with foreign researchers in order to study

accessible alternatives for touch screens, which have become an increasingly common interface on most of today's devices. Although extremely versatile, touch screen technology is not accessible to persons with low vision, and alternatives are actively being sought in order to ensure accessibility to all.

FITA continues to seek new project partners in order to realize the National ICT Strategy targets. One such objective is the creation of a pool of assistive technology products that can be shared by Computer Training and Learning Centres (CTLCs) in order to address effectively the requirements of students attending training courses at these regional centres.

Access to services

The information society we live in today has become an essential part of the economic, educational and social life of Maltese citizens. This heightened reliance on ICT to convey/distribute products and services has raised hope and concern as to whether these new services are fully accessible for all, including disabled persons.

Through empowerment and social inclusion disabled persons need to rely less on family and state support. In ensuring that due steps are taken to minimise the digital divide, FITA aims to enable individuals to contribute productively to society and the economy.

FITA encourages positive discrimination in respect of disabled individuals, and provide them with the option of using ICT in order for them to fulfil the requirements of a specific opportunity.

FITA facilitates the integration of disabled persons who find themselves at a disadvantage in a particular environment, by providing equitable and appropriate enabling accommodation. In past years (2006-2009) FITA has benefitted from ETC schemes which enabled a number of disabled persons to participate in work experiences through FITA.

A key role of FITA, is that of setting accessibility standards, carrying out audits and issuing the relevant certification. This service relates to both websites and software products. By ensuring that services are accessible, the investment in assistive ICT is made worthwhile. This is because assistive technology will not work correctly when accessing services that are badly designed and do not cater for accessibility requirements.

FITA has repeatedly voiced the need for a Maltese Speech Engine (MSE) that can ensure access to Maltese text content for Maltese speakers. With the support of MITA, we developed Maltese language based educational software intended to promote Maltese literacy.

In 2008, FITA submitted a project for ERDF funding through the Cohesion Funds programme 2008-2013. FITA is not working alone on this project. Other partners and stakeholders include the Education Division, the associations of blind persons, Microsoft Corporation and the Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA). Their

support proved critical in ensuring that such technology will truly address the needs of the widest possible groups of beneficiaries, including illiterate persons.

Access to knowledge

FITA also works with ETC in order to provide ICT training courses for persons with a visual impairment. Other training courses organised by FITA with the help of the Education Division and MCAST are intended for persons with intellectual impairments and communication difficulties. FITA courses promote access to information and fuller participation in e-society, on a par to non-disabled persons. The benefits are more wide ranging than basic ICT know how. These courses also lead to ECDL certification, which is another strong point when seeking a job.

FITA continues to gather information on local websites in order to gauge ongoing trends in accessibility levels. This information is invaluable when defining accessibility criteria and policy measures.

FITA is also carrying out research on potential career paths for disabled students who seek employment in the ICT industry. This research involves working with commercial services providers and can create more opportunities for raising awareness about ICT accessibility, in the way training courses are provided.

The common focus of these different initiatives, enables FITA to provide a holistic solution to the ICT accessibility needs of disabled persons. The contributions of funding partners, and partner organisations remain critical to the operations of FITA and the goals we set ourselves.

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