

Making ICT an empowering tool

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Stanley M. Debono
Executive Coordinator
stanley.debono@gov.mt



Michael Micallef
Officer-in-Charge of ICT Audits
Foundation for Information Technology
Accessibility (FITA), Malta
michael.micallef@gov.mt

Equal Opportunities Act (EOA) and ICTS

There is general consensus that computer technology and electronic telecommunications have a tremendous potential to broaden the lives and increase the independence of disabled persons. However, increased reliance on ICT to distribute products and services raises concern as to whether these new services are designed to be fully accessible to all persons, including disabled persons. Without well coordinated efforts throughout society, there is a risk that these Information Communications Technology (ICT) developments will result in products and services which continue to broaden the information gap. In Malta, anti-discrimination legislation entitled the Equal Opportunities Act - Disabled Persons of 2000 (EOA) is instrumental in ensuring greater inclusiveness through the removal of access barriers.

The EOA is comprehensive legislation built upon the American Anti-Discrimination Act, the UK Disability Discrimination Act and the Australian Disability Discrimination Act. Maltese anti-discrimination legislation identifies six areas which are education, employment, goods and services, access, insurance and accommodation. Presently, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) relates mostly to the former three.

Extension of ICT support

This year the National Commission Disabled Persons (KNPD) which is the entity responsible for enforcing the EOA, ran an information campaign entitled 'Equality, Good for you, Good for me', highlighting the positive financial outcomes of increased accessibility. The main concept is that disabled persons will never become positive contributors towards society unless they are

provided with the education and accommodation necessary for their emancipation. The extent to which ICT can support disabled persons can be categorised into three main levels.

- Some disabled individuals will easily use the same standard technology used by the non-disabled user. Though the positive impact of ICT may be great, the level of investment in ICT will be minimal. In this case, society's expectations and the individual's exposure to and skill in using ICT play a major part in maximising the benefits that can be gained.
- Others with varying or more severe impairments will need to use assistive ICT solutions that initially tend not to form part of standard ICT equipment. If assistive ICT is provided early on, disabled persons will be able to better use it in accessing education and eventually become gainfully employed.
- Yet another group will be made up of persons with severe impairments, or a combination of impairments which restrict their ability to work and participate in society at a high level. Nonetheless ICT can also help in this case, by providing a necessary means of communication and allow individuals to make life choices.

Whatever options are available the individual should be equipped with the necessary skills and information to make an informed choice and ICT remains a very promising empowerment tool in this regard.



ICT enabled social model of disability

Malta shares the same population percentage proportion of disabled persons as the European Union, which is circa 15 percent. More detailed statistical data can be obtained from the annual reports of KNPD at www.knpd.org. The lack of natural resources meant that human resources have always played a prominent role in the Maltese economy. Whereas ICT usually improves the productivity of individuals, for disabled persons it represents an opportunity to communicate, gain access to education services and become gainfully employed.

The Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) was established by the Malta Information Technology and Training Services Limited (MITTS) and KNPD on 2 October, 2001. In line with the EOA, FITA applies the principles of the Social Model of Disability throughout its activities and initiatives. This model of disability, seeks to eliminate access barriers induced by society, through social change. It thus aims to enable individuals to contribute their full potential as part of society, irrespective of their impairment. It does this by suggesting that ICT be used as a means to modify pre-established rules for achieving goals, instead of dwelling on the restrictions and limitations resulting from a biological impairment. Whereas impairments are usually not curable, the constraints resulting from them can often be surmounted or avoided through social change and proper accommodation.

The Foundation's early initiatives focused on the promotion of greater access to ICT, through the provision of Microsoft software, ICT equipment and Internet access. However, in itself, giving access to a computer, or any other ICT device or service, may not necessarily help. One must go beyond the basic issue of access to the larger issue of how ICT-based 'solutions' can effectively help the individual.

Inclusive training and organic growth

Over the past years, inclusive education in Malta has led to higher expectations. More disabled persons can now aim for a good job, financial independence and greater participation in the society. FITA's recent services and initiatives are progressively evolving to become content focused. The importance for assistive technology to become ubiquitous, the availability of accessible ICT training (particularly European computer driving licence certification), emphasis on ICT accessibility audits and support for the creation of accessible software applications.

The Foundation has collaborated with the University of Malta on projects and creation of courses focusing on ICT accessibility.

Statistical research on the ICT usage trends of Maltese disabled persons is also being carried out, in order to compare and contrast the expectations of disabled persons with what is available in the market. This knowledge can lead to better informed business decisions and enhance the public policy making process.

One aspect that is observed is that the plans and projects should be left to evolve organically from the people these are intended for. This suggests that policy makers should aim to help and provide support mechanisms to truly enable the development of sustainable projects. Notwithstanding this, a flexible top down approach to inclusion will promote good practice and also help establish standards, whereby the waste of resources resulting from duplication, is minimised.

Achieving expertise and financial sufficiency

In identifying the most effective steps necessary to reach the desired goals, it is important to consult with individuals or associations

knowledgeable about the requirements of a particular group especially disabled persons themselves. Micro-loans are an inclusive and dignified way to provide new opportunities and expand the options for disabled persons. An abundance of potential alternatives exist that help in reducing financial barriers to assistive technology access. Among these are a range of possibilities related to funding, tax incentives, and equipment recycling.

Services like the provision of ICT training for persons with a visual impairment or

an intellectual impairment have proven to be very successful. Elderly persons are also using their newly learnt computer skills, in order to keep in touch with friends and family, both in Malta and abroad.

FITA's training personnel are certified by the British Computer Association for the Blind (BCAB), and apart from being members of the European Design for All e-Accessibility Network (EDEAN) FITA benefit from a network of highly knowledgeable disabled ICT users who help to monitor accessibility aspects of the ICT industry.

The involvement of stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the Foundation's initiatives is highly valued. Partnership with business entities is particularly relevant since accessibility to products and services, access to employment and changing attitudes cannot be achieved if economic considerations are ignored. ICT consultancy was always central to FITA's role as an information provider. Many schools, businesses and individuals have benefited from this free service, in order to provide the necessary ICT accommodation for disabled students and employees.



Source: <http://www.osb.k12.ok.us/A.T.%20class.jpg>

An example where anti-discrimination legislation guaranteed accessibility in ICT, was the requirement for school computer labs to become accessible. In order to deter theft, these were typically set up on the first or second floor. The installation of lifts or transfer of computer labs to the ground floor would not have been achieved so quickly without a law that prohibited discrimination against disabled persons.

Website and software accessibility is another area that benefits strongly from the EOA. Together with other stakeholders, FITA is involved in the development of ICT design standards that regulate Maltese websites in order to ensure accessibility to disabled persons and users of assistive technology.

Concerted efforts for success

Involvement in EU programmes is also a high priority for the Foundation. It is involved in a Leonardo Pilot Project, which is creating a 'Train the Trainer Course in Entrepreneurship'. The Foundation's primary goal is to make this information accessible to disabled persons. This, together with the necessary ICT tools, will place them on a level playing field with other budding entrepreneurs and open additional possibilities apart from employment.

The Foundation also seeks to promote the inclusion of ICT accessibility as a basic criterion in the early stages of project planning. It is also working in order to build on accessibility expertise in order to boost the competitiveness of the local ICT industry. Another area important to FITA is the development of Maltese speech synthesis to be used not only by the blind but also by all Maltese speakers, in diverse applications where audio can be used as the main information medium. Technological improvements are ongoing, but the greater involvement of disabled persons in decision making roles will help guarantee that their rights are safeguarded.

The success of FITA was spurred by the unified vision arising out of strong collaboration with different entities working in ICT related areas. However, much more is left to do. Greater rationalisation so as to minimise duplication of work and waste of resources is amongst the primary goals. Government and private enterprise must cooperate in developing better policy and service delivery by identifying clear lines of responsibility for co-ordinating their efforts, since a 'joined up' approach has already proven to reduce the fragmentation that can create barriers to community participation. ■

Healthcare providers benefit from broadband

Thousands of healthcare providers throughout Australia are now reaping the benefits of business grade broadband, thanks to the Australian Government's 'Broadband for Health' programme.

Business grade broadband is a high-speed, always-on, communications link that provides faster access to vital healthcare information such as pathology results, hospital discharge summaries, specialist reports and x-ray images.

High-speed access to clinical information is helping to improve healthcare processes; reduce the need for travel; improve communication; assist in education; reduce phone costs and lessen isolation for those especially in rural and remote areas.

The Australian Government's 'Broadband for Health' programme will spend \$69 million over three years to 30 June 2007 to support the uptake of broadband services in general practices, aboriginal community controlled health services and community pharmacies nationwide.

The Australian Government's Eastern Goldfields Regional Reference Site (EGRRS) is an excellent example of how broadband can improve healthcare services in regional communities by increasing safety, quality and efficiency through communications infrastructure. In recognition of its excellence, on 7 March 2006 the EGRRS project has won the Australian Telecommunications Users Group award for Best Communications Solution (Regional).

Dr. Andrew Siegmund, an EGRRS participant and a general practice project manager, said that with the implementation of the network, his practice had gone from very basic systems to a

cutting-edge technology network without problems." We can see benefits. The network is running smoothly and we are saving on costs. We've seen improvements in the way we run our practice using the applications the network carries," Dr Siegmund adds.

EGRRS participants moved on 1 July 2006 to the locally owned GoldHealth Network and continue to see the benefits of being part of a health services network.

The 'Broadband for Health' programme draws together several government initiatives including the 'Access to Broadband Technology' initiative to support health sector broadband connectivity. It has strong links to the 'National Broadband Strategy' that is managed by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (<http://www.dcita.gov.au/>). The programme receives stakeholder input through the Broadband for Health Working Group, made up of key health, consumer, government and industry representatives.

More information can be availed on the Australian Government's Broadband for Health programme at the new Managed Health Network Grants initiative (<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/health-ehealth-broadband-grants.htm>) ■

For further details, visit : www.health.gov.au/ehealth

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