

A fair and equitable online society

Michael Takemura, HP Accessibly Program Office, discusses the provision of ICT with particular regard to people with disabilities . . .

The European Union's eEurope 2005 Action Plan, holds the objective of achieving 'an Information Society for all'. This is no timid goal. It means we must overcome all sorts of social differences and teleological barriers to ensure an inclusive digital society that provides opportunities for all of us, including people with disabilities and the elderly.

HP and the IT industry are keenly aware that ICT has a role in many aspects of our daily lives. Increasingly, our society is dependent upon computers or communication devices and online information for employment, education, entertainment, participation in government and more. We recognise that ICT can be an enabler or a barrier to our ability to access and use vital information.

Worldwide, there are an estimated 600 million people with a disability. The global population of people aged 65 or over is now approximately 450 million. This represents more than a billion people that can benefit from accessible technology and access to online information and services. Closer to home, there are approximately 37 million Europeans affected by a disability and about 84 million people age 65 or over throughout Europe.

As we European citizens collectively build the Information Society for all, there are many important considerations. First and foremost, there is the recognition that every citizen has an equal right to enjoy and utilise our new digital society; Thus, we must provide equity in our approach to delivering online services and information, especially for the elderly and for people with differing abilities. The European Commission has made great strides in developing and fostering policies on e-accessibility in Europe.

Looking beyond Europe, it is important that we work toward the international harmonisation of regulations and technology standards pertaining to accessibility. Despite the good intentions of various countries or geographic regions, localised standards for accessibility are creating a disjointed, often conflicting, approach to providing digital products, services or information. Strong international standards must be the foundation for the worldwide digital society. Commonality of standards will help to ensure the compatibility of ICT products and lower prices for consumers, and will provide a more consistent user experience.

Policies and standards will help to build a foundation for the development of accessible platforms in our knowledge-based economy. However, it is me fervent participation of government agencies, educational institutions, private commerce, non-profit organisations and the like that will fan the flames of online access for all. These organisations must see the benefits of delivering accessible information and services to their constituents and customers. What's more, they must see that there is a cost to excluding a portion of the population from information, services and applications that are not fully accessible.

This is an exciting time. Never before in our history have we had such an opportunity to improve the human condition through information and communication technologies. We can improve the quality of life and the independence of the elderly and people with disabilities.

The results of accessibility can be dramatic: a blind person can navigate city streets with confidence by receiving real-time verbal directions from a Pocket PC that combines global positioning capabilities with speech synthesis. A person who recently had a stroke can use a handheld device that provides alternative augmentative communication, allowing them to place an order in a restaurant. A student with cognitive disabilities can use software that improves their opportunities to graduate and gain employment. An elderly person with macular degeneration can enlarge on-screen fonts or use a screen reader to access information about events in her community. Each of these individuals can enjoy me benefits of government information and services that are accessible to them, allowing them to meet their potential.

The drive for e-government will lead the way to a fair and equitable online society. Our government agencies will set the high watermark for accessibility for all. eEurope 2005 has set the goals - now it is up to us to achieve them.



Michael Takemura
HP Accessibility Program Office
20555 SH 249
Houston, TX 77070
USA

Tel: +1 281 518 0739
michael.takemura@hp.com
www.hp.com/accessibility