

Ken Salaets

The Information Technology Industry Council membership covers the globe and includes such companies as Canon (Japan), HP (U.S.) RIM (Canada, makers of the BlackBerry) and SAP (Germany). ITI has a very active ICT Accessibility Committee, which I manage, and we have been working with governments, consumers and industry from around the globe for many years. Indeed, collaboration is the one of the key formulas of our success.

ITI members make products that meet the demands of our customers. If our customers are not interested in buying our accessible ICT products, then of course there is no incentive to make the products, and we miss out on an important business opportunity. Accordingly, our member companies strive to constantly evaluate how they are doing in the marketplace, and we appreciate receiving feedback at events and forums such as this.

One of our industry's primary goals is for consumers around the globe to have the ability to choose the combination of solutions that work best for them. The "eco-system" in which ICT companies operate is rich and complex, and includes hardware, software, the operating system, the network, media, telecommunications and assistive technologies. To maximize consumer choice and opportunity, the creators of these components must all work together to ensure a harmonized approach to building accessible ICT products. Governments can play a crucial role by adopting policies that encourage harmonized approaches, including voluntary consensus standards.

Why is harmonization important, especially as it relates to standards and accessibility? ICT manufacturers design products for the global market. The ideal for us is to be able to "build once, sell everywhere." A harmonized ICT marketplace frees manufacturers to concentrate resources on meeting the needs of consumers rather than on conforming to a multiplicity of overlapping and possibly conflicting requirements. Another benefit is the cost savings. If we can build and sell essentially the same products in Europe, Asia and Africa, for example, we can spread research, development and other costs over a larger number of products, reducing risk while increasing the return on investment.

Harmonization clearly benefits governments and consumers, too. Governments are able to tap a broader, market-tested supply of ICT products that can meet the needs of all of their citizens. Also, harmonized markets generate greater competition, given consumers access to more choices at lower prices.

The costs of complying with regulations and administrative rules, such as labeling and certifications, are significant, particularly if a manufacturer is faced with multiple or unique technical and administrative requirements. In addition, the process itself is expensive and time-consuming. It may not be too surprising to learn that, for some companies, the number of their compliance and regulatory lawyers exceeds that of people designing and developing the actual products. Typically, these costs get passed on in the form of higher prices while producing little if any improvement in accessibility, pushing some technology out of reach of the consumers who need it. I would hope that we as a community of stakeholders would always keep that in mind when considering conformance assessment approaches and requirements.

When we have a global ICT accessibility standard that is widely adopted and respected, it creates certainty in the marketplace that enables manufacturers to innovate beyond the standard, and it is through that innovation, that aspect of product development, that you have competition. It also enables small- and medium-sized businesses to compete. Indeed, many of the greatest innovations that you and I now have in our pockets or sitting on the counter before us were created by people in sheds, in garages and at kitchen tables. Innovation occurs at many levels and often on an individual basis. If we embrace harmonized standards upon which these innovators can develop and design new products and take their ideas to the next level, we will encourage even more innovation in the accessibility marketplace.

Concerning harmonization, ITI is an organization that belongs to and participates in a number of groups, and is supported by a number of groups. We host the Secretariat for INCITS, which is one of the primary ICT standards development organizations in the U.S. We also participate in the ISO/IEC JTC1 Special Working Group on Accessibility, an international body of government, industry and consumer experts that has produced an inventory of accessibility-related ICT standards and user needs. The Special Working Group has also produced a “gap

analysis” that identifies where additional accessibility standards may need to be developed. This important, authoritative tool is readily available for use by governments, industry and consumers at no charge and, if utilized, could serve as a critical starting point for further progress in this area.

ITI also has the privilege of participating in an organization called GISA, which stands for the Global Industry Standards Alliance. The group also includes EICTA from Europe, JEITA from Japan, and the Consumer Electronics Association from the United States. The same industry associations have formed the Trilateral Group, which is an executive-level body that meets to collaborate on issues of importance to the ICT and consumer electronics industries.

GISA and the Trilateral Group will be holding meetings next month (April 2007) and later this year to discuss an array of issues ranging from climate change to digital television to ICT accessibility. During the meetings, the groups will be considering a proposal from ITI to create an inventory of global industry best practices relative to accessible ICTs. This is important because one of the key drivers in the global ICT marketplace is peer pressure. In other words, if you have ICT companies in effect looking over each others’ shoulders, it could help lead to a more consistent approach to ICT accessibility and motivate other manufacturers to address the issue. If we can expand the acceptance of harmonized standards in the U.S., Europe and Japan, and also extend it to Australia, China, Latin America and Africa, we can greatly enhance the benefits of harmonization for all stakeholders.

Thanks again for the opportunity to participate in this program. ITI welcomes this important dialog, and we stand ready to assist you in developing progressive, market-based solutions to expand opportunities for people with disabilities around the world.

Question and Answer Session

Question 3:

In terms of reaching more people, will it be possible to use existing social structures such as libraries? The people who run the libraries are used to working with users just getting used to technology. It would be a way in for people who can’t afford the technology themselves, and it could spread it a little more widely. Also, librarians are used to cooperating with other libraries.

Ken Salaets:

One of the various challenges the ICT industry is facing is the disposal or “takeback” of outdated technology. For some of us who have ready access to technology, I think, we have become rather spoiled and we tend to discard ICT equipment that is actually still very good and very useful. There are programs that I am aware of in the United States where they take older computers and such and train individuals in how to refurbish these machines and use them. There may also be international organizations that facilitate the process of taking older technology and moving it into marketplaces where it may be viewed as new technology and help give them a foothold in the digital world.