

## **Tamas Babinszki**

In order to efficiently follow the initiatives of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it would be beneficial for all governments to make their legislation include mandatory accessibility standards. Legislation is the most powerful tool available to implement accessibility requirements. Mandatory legislation is more effective than voluntary standards because compliance can be ensured.

In developing countries, where there are people without the basic necessities of food and clean drinking water, where technology has not yet penetrated the economy, many wonder what difference mandatory accessibility could possibly make. Certainly the concerns are real and accessibility standards would not matter if the conditions were to remain. However, there is a great advantage to mandatory standards in those countries because the earlier accessibility is in place, the easier it is to implement them without future difficulties. If accessibility related legislation is already in place when technology is imported, the methodology of developing information and communication technology (ICT) will be well established. Knowledge will be gained from the experiences of other countries where technology was introduced and developed before accessibility standards. The developing countries, advancing technologically with standards already in place, would not have to continually alter standards and remake products, like their predecessors when faced with new standards, therefore the burden imposed on the economy by trying to change what is in existence to meet standards would be alleviated.

One example of the difficulties of not having standards in place from the beginning lies in the United States. Many technologies were already in place when Section 508 standards became mandatory. Many products and development procedures had to be redeveloped and redesigned. The methodology of development had to be updated to reflect the necessary changes which would make products compliant with the Section 508 standards. One of the major difficulties for development companies was that products, which were developed before 2001, but updated later, had to contain accessibility

features, which imposed an extra burden on the development process, while products, which were designed after 2001 did not have to face this challenge because they had to include accessibility from the beginning.

To provide effective accessibility requirements, we need to divide our legislation into two areas: first, the type of accessibility standards and second, the placement of these standards. In other words, we must determine what kind of accessibility standards will be applied and what the scope of their implementation will be.

If we are looking for existing legislation to determine which standards should be applicable, harmonization and globalization of standards should be taken into account. The advantage, especially in developing countries, is that a lot of the hard work has already been done by many developed countries. We can implement standards which were already tested and proven successful, thus leading to achievement of globalization and harmonization of accessibility standards. On the long-run, this method of harmonization will not only make future work easier, but by implementing similar standards in different countries, there will be more resources to evaluate experience and make future modifications as needed. The more countries will use the same standards, the more governments can contribute to the future development of accessibility.

As with safety regulations, accessibility should be applicable throughout the entire nation. Enforcement, especially in places where it is difficult to comply with standards, should not be penalizing, but rather supportive of the different governmental and corporate agencies. Governments need to work with these agencies to help them comply with legislation. This support could take many forms. For example, agencies might receive a certain grace period – time to comply with legislation. The length of the grace period should, of course, be realistic and reflect the country's ability to achieve compliance. Another form of government support should be encouragement, to make all parties interested in developing accessible products. Governments could motivate agencies by awarding contracts to those which are more accessible.

With the groundwork in place, the next step would be for governments to recognize organizations by doing business exclusively with those who meet accessibility standards. Ideally, the ultimate goal would be to extend accessibility requirements to all non-governmental entities.

Accessibility related legislation not only benefits a community with disabilities, but it also benefits the organizations who comply with legislation. Among many advantages, more methodology is added to the development procedure to increase efficiency, and more business opportunities become available as people with disabilities are able to use more products.

For the last four years, I have been the head of the Section 508 technical team at the United States Patent and Trademark Office. We have developed very strict policies for contracts and procedures, in accordance with the legal requirements. Contracting developers have to attend Section 508 training. As it is mentioned in the convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in Article 9, Section 2.h, development teams are trained to start incorporating the Section 508 requirements from the beginning of the development process. In the testing stages of the development life cycle, all products must pass Section 508 testing.

Just one example we have found of the benefit of implementing standards from the earliest stages was when one of the contractors that completed Section 508 training started implementing accessibility at the beginning of the design process. The contractor actually saved money by adding Section 508 to their development procedures. They found that the best way to incorporate Section 508 standards was to create reusable code and development templates. This helped speed up the development process by making it more efficient. In the long run, this organization benefited from this new process and their websites and software are Section 508 compliant and accessible.

I suggest that developed countries with advanced legislation on accessibility provide support to developing countries which are in the process of creating their accessibility

related legislation. This will enable them to be most effective and they can benefit from work that has been done so far. In a way, developing countries have a great advantage over countries which already have accessibility standards, and there is an enormous resource of lessons learned which is available for use and improvement.