"Implementating ICT Accessibility
The Challenges and Opportunities"

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Thank you for joining us this evening for the FITA Annual General Meeting 2009.

My name is Maria Mercieca and I work at FITA. Today I wish to give you a brief overview and examples of FITA's endeavours promoting initiatives targeted by Stream 2 of the National ICT Strategy 2008-2010. I will also intersperse these with real life experiences from some of the beneficiaries of FITA's services and initiatives.

A key imperative for the information society is that of 'independent living' and requires investing in the autonomy of all people to reduce public expenditure, increase personal opportunity, and restore dignity and self respect. This can only be achieved if we have a 'barrier free' information society.

Barriers can be physical (kerbs), mental (skills and knowledge), social (attitude, affiliation, and orientation), or economic.

The world of design tends to be a 'normative' world as can be seen by anyone unfortunate enough to be significantly taller or shorter than the 'average'. They experience endless difficulty in clothes, cars, restaurant tables, and all those other things which 'work' for everyone else. These problems are extended a hundredfold for any of the millions of people described as 'disabled' by society, and often to the extent of keeping them completely out of the worlds of education, work, and leisure.

The power of the technologies and applications underlying the so called 'information society' offer solutions to many of these problems, and many of the European Union's

programs and research collaborations look at how the benefits might be brought to as many people as possible.

What really happens as a result of an impairment is that someone finds a physical or social barrier to their freedom of action in society, and it is the presence of the barrier that makes them disabled (so a wheelchair user in a flat world is not disabled by the handicap / impairment). The solution for the information society, then, is to show how the clever use of 'information and communication technology' (ICT) can overcome barriers and increase empowerment and equality of previously 'disabled' people.[1]

While living conditions vary, persons with disabilities relate experiences of being exposed to discrimination, social exclusion and poverty, as the KNPD's analysis of the 2005 Census suggests.

At the same time, the rights of persons with disabilities are increasingly recognized. This shift to the human rights perspective, which is taking place in all economic and social systems, has been endorsed by the United Nations. In Malta, it materialized via the Equal Opportunities Act of 2000. This legislation, of which the National Commission Disabled Persons is the guardian, is a valuable catalyst of social change, and primary policy changing force, promoting universal design principles, and FITA's ICT accessibility efforts.

With the help of Mr. Stanley M. Debono, we will make a quick reference to some of the analysis carried out by KNPD over the 2005 census., in order to get a snapshot of where disabled persons stand in terms of access to education and employment.[2]

Age distribution of disabled persons

When percentages of different age groups of disabled people are compared, it can be noted that there are sharp increases in the percentage of disabled people amongst the elderly.

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[1] ACTSLINE Guideline Summary GADB3
[2] Refer to accompanying slides for statistical data and graphs.

As this population is still within the working age, and considering the extension of working life and the promotion of active ageing, these figures highlight the need to provide measures for disabled people to continue working and to provide adaptation for disabled people within the work place[3].

I will mention two retired persons, who availed of FITA's services in the past. Mr. Saliba and Mrs. Azzopardi, are common examples of elderly individuals who thanks to communications technology were able to carry on with their life, within their own home. Access to computers and the Internet has enabled them to communicate with friends and family on a regular basis. They also make use of e-services, carrying out banking transactions, shopping and accessing government services. Equally important, they also joined online communities of individuals sharing their own interests and hobbies. In the case of Mr Saliba, it is mechanical engineering and gardening. Ms Azzopardi prefers knitting, reading and cooking. Whatever their interests, technology has enabled them to remain mentally active from the comfort of their own home.

Access to Technology

In the past two years working at FITA, I witnessed major changes taking place thanks, in no small part to the rapid advancement in ICTs which have opened new avenues for development around the world.

FITA focuses on the two important areas, namely access to information and knowledge and capacity building amongst disabled persons. We believe that from an ICT accessibility perspective, these are the first steps towards improving the quality of life of persons with disabilities by providing access to information and knowledge, new employment and socialization opportunities. Increased ICT accessibility, will therefore generate a positive impact on the information illustrated in the subsequent slides.

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[3] KNPD – Census 2005 Analysis

Education and Literacy

Apart from MyWeb and ECDL training organized in collaboration with the Education's Life Long Learning Department and the MCAST ICT Institute, FITA also provides one-to-one ICT training for visually impaired persons. These training programs are complemented via an online community and phone based ICT support. Despite our limited resources, FITA continues to provide this service as it has proven invaluable in continuing to encourage effective use of ICT services, beyond the basic class training.

Always related to ICT training, FITA works with MITC and other NGOs, in order to provide greater access to technology and increased ICT literacy via community technology learning centres (CTLCs).

FITA, the Education's Inclusive Education Network and the Speech Therapy Department collaborate to provide a specialised digital divide response team to deliver assistive ICT solutions to our common clientele.

One such person is Ms Cutajar. Ms Cutajar attended FITA's ICT training courses in the past years. She is now attending University where she uses her mobile's calendar utiltity to keep track of her daily activities and class schedule. Speech synthesis helps her access paper based media and the Internet allows her to keep in touch with other students and collaborate on assignments even when at home.

I cannot refer to Education without mentioning the Maltese Speech Engine project. FITA's leading role in the development of a Maltese Speech Engine will not only benefit disabled persons via greater access to Maltese language based content, but will also assist many young children and illiterate persons in using ICT to increase their level of formal education. This is one of the biggest projects embarked upon by FITA, and Mr. Roger Davies-Barrett will give more information about how you can get involved, in the next presentation.

Employment

FITA continues to provide refurbished computer equipment on loan to disabled persons. The increased use of ICT and higher expectations of disabled persons, mean that five year old computers are only valid as an introduction to computers. Once the necessary ICT skills are acquired, most disabled persons quickly move on to later technology, in order to benefit more widely from access to information and e-services. FITA is liaising with the Malta Community Chest Fund and the Malta Communications Authority to ensure that ICT equipment is adequately matched to users' needs.

This initiative has proven to be very successful in enticing disabled persons to familiarize themselves with ICT. Ms Bugeja, had originally obtained a refurbished computer on loan from FITA. Having shown a good propensity to make effective use of computers, she eventually moved on to carry out a work experience at FITA. She is now employed elsewhere, within a clerical environment. At FITA, Ms Bugeja received the necessary training on the use of screen reader technology and how this software can give access to office application software, the Internet, email and other ICT tools found in most of today's offices. She is now attending ECDL training sessions at FITA and planning to obtain the relevant certifications.

Lastly, I can also mention myself and Mr. Sciberras, who through being employed at FITA, have learnt what it takes to run an office, and a very busy office at that. Few employers would have given us the chance to prove ourselves. However we do our best and made considerable improvements. I am responsible for the administration of partner offers like those provided by GO and Melita and also assist with research projects. Mr. Sciberras assists with the coordination of ICT courses at MCAST and the applications for EU projects. Mr. Debono and Mr. Micallef provide monitoring and training, and together with MITA's collaboration provided us with the accommodation necessary for us to be independent and contribute to our fullest. In my case this accommodation consisted primarily of a higher desk and computer based telephony. Mr Sciberras uses screen reader technology and a guide dog.

I wish to point out that work experiences at FITA are possible thanks to funding schemes provided by the Employment Training Corporation.

Conclusion

The policy framework, regulations, standards and guidelines, meant to ensure ICT accessibility do exist and are constantly being improved. FITA's ICT accessibility audit and consultancy services provide direct assistance in this area. A prominent example, is the cooperation with MITA's Quality Assurance Department that has ensured that Malta's public websites and e-services abide by established accessibility critetria.

Unfortunately there still remain decision makers and project implementors, particularly in the commercial sector, whom we have failed to reach out to, and have still not come to appreciate the all round benefits of ensuring accessibility for all. Unless these groups learn to value the importance of universal design, the public will keep on having to live with badly implemented ICT accessibility solutions.

Much has been done, and a lot of work is still ahead. I believe that your presence here augers well, and that together we can continue to promote wider accessibility to ICT.

Thank you.