



Foundation for
Information Technology Accessibility

*Gattard House,
National Road,
Blata l-Bajda
HMR 9010
Malta*

Overview of FITA and ICT Accessibilty including the Maltese Speech Engine Interview with Stanley M Debono , CEO, FITA

The Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) is an independent Foundation which was set up in 2000 by the Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA) and the National Commission Disabled Persons (KNPD).

Our aim is to promote a better quality of life for persons with disability. FITA addresses the ICT needs of all persons with disability irrespective of the impairment category. We help individual persons with disability, collaborating with employers, education and other sectors with a view to providing a holistic solution. Initially FITA focused on research, but we discovered a gaps in the service provision, mostly cause by lack of accessibility. We partnered with a number of organizations in order to address these issues. Some of the services, we provide ourseleves and others we only administer, whilst key elements are provided by other entities with bigger budgets and resources.

Amongst our many projects and initiative, one of the major ones was the Maltese Speech Engine (MSE), developed by Crimsonwing Malta Plc. This project relied on 85% ERDF funds and 15% National funding in order to produce a speech engine running on MS Windows which can convert Maltese electronic text, whether it be Laws, Legal notices, websites in Maltese, online newspapers, ebooks and novels into either of three intelligible Maltese voices.

The beauty of this technology is that although the innovative aspect surrounding the Maltese language was very challenging, we did not reinvent the wheel. The product is downloadable free of charge, and you can make it work with most speech enabled products that support the proper version of the Speech Applicationa Programming Interface (SAPI).

Through this project and derivative products, FITA continues to work hand in hand with other businesses so that ICT products on the market will be more accessible from the word go.

We also published many e-books in Maltese. We did this, basically to bring awareness of what are the possibilities of the MSE. We are exploring the use of the MSE amongst people with Dyslexia illiterate adults and pre-literate children. I am convinced that others will find many different applications we have not thought of yet.

It is important for industry to maximize ICT accessibility, since the ICT sector is a global market and leaving out any part of it has exponential implications not only on a company's profit but also on the social impact of their product or service.

All our services and initiatives promote some aspects of ICT accessibility. Investing resources in providing the right assistive technology and training individuals in its proper use is futile if all services are inaccessible and incompatible with the assistive ICT used by individuals. We therefore believe FITA has an important role to play in ensuring all ICT is designed to be as accessible as possible, so that it can be used effectively by all.