

U.S.-EC Information and Communications Technology (ICT) **Standards Dialogue on e-accessibility**

January 2008

OBJECTIVE OF THE DIALOGUE

The goal of the **U.S.-EC ICT Standards Dialogue on e-accessibility** is to work with the EC to avoid technical specifications and regulations including conformity assessment procedures that may stifle accessibility innovation and technology to the detriment of both suppliers and end-users. The Department of Commerce advocates a general performance-based approach for requirements that are helpful in guiding the development of new accessibility technologies.

This U.S.-EC Dialogue focuses on advancing bilateral cooperation on e-accessibility in the broader context of an exchange of information regarding the planned use of ICT standards in support of regulatory and public policy goals.

CONTEXT

The Dialogue, originally launched with a video conference in March 2004 with 4 proposed topics, currently focuses on e-accessibility. It was reinvigorated as part of the U.S.-EU Innovation Initiative proposed in 2006 by Commerce Secretary Gutierrez and EC Vice President Verheugen (also Commissioner of Enterprise and Industry). Through an exchange of letters, Secretary Gutierrez and Vice President Verheugen identified three areas of cooperation, in which e-accessibility, under the Dialogue, is one of them. The Dialogue is also under the U.S.-EU Economic Agenda. Additionally, the U.S. Trade Representative lists the e-accessibility Dialogue as one of the dialogues under the U.S.-EU Regulatory Cooperation. The work of the Dialogue and its accomplishments are reported at the annual U.S.-EU Summit. The 2007 Summit was held April 30, 2007 in Washington, D.C, with the participation of U.S. President George W. Bush, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso and the EU German Presidency's German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Commission (EC) has considered several policy instruments that fall within the existing legal framework (e.g. public procurement, product certification, and specific legislative provisions), to remove barriers stemming from the inappropriate design of ICT products and services and achieve voluntary harmonization of Member

States' e-accessibility policies, which are fragmented and inconsistent throughout the EU. The EC released a Communication in September 2005 that proposed supplemental voluntary measures to foster the development of technical standards enhancing e-accessibility, teach e-skills, enhance web accessibility implementation, encourage EU Member States to share best practices, and stimulate research and technological development in the ICT field. Additional legislation at the EU level may be considered in the future, depending on the progress and impact the Communication's non-mandatory measures will have on improving e-accessibility in Europe.

IN THE UNITED STATES

In the U.S., the relevant e-accessibility requirements for ICT are in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and in section 255 of the Telecommunications Act.

Section 508, administered by the U.S. Access Board, generally requires Federal agencies to ensure that the procurement of electronic and information technology takes into account the needs of all end users – including people with disabilities. Section 508 requirements apply to the public procurement of a wide range of information and telecommunications products, including desk and portable computers and peripherals, software and applications, websites, video and multimedia products, fixed and mobile telephones, etc.

The Federal Acquisition Regulation incorporates Section 508 standards into the federal government's procurement regulations. The General Services Administration provides support and a number of programs and tools to help determine conformance to e-accessibility requirements.

Section 255 regulations, administered by the Federal Communications Commission, apply to manufacturers of telecommunications equipment and customer premises equipment. Manufacturers must ensure that such equipment is accessible and usable, if it is readily achievable. If accessibility is not readily achievable, the manufacturer must make the equipment compatible with peripheral devices used by people with disabilities, if that is readily achievable.

DIALOGUE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The European Commission issued Mandate M 376 to the European Standards Organizations (ESO) in support of accessibility requirements for the public procurement of ICT products and services. The ESOs accepted the mandate and the work has begun. As agreed under this Dialogue, U.S. government experts are participating in the work of the European Standardization Organizations.

The U.S. Access Board initiated a refresh of Section 508 standards and created a U.S. Federal Advisory Committee to review and update the electronic and information technology requirements. A representative of the European Commission is a voting

member in the Federal Advisory Committee to ensure coherence in requirements to the greatest extent possible.

This level of collaboration is critical in helping governments respond more effectively to meet the technology needs of citizens with disabilities and age-related limitations.

The parties took a collaborative approach in the work of ISO/IEC JTC 1, identifying relevant e-accessibility standards and will take this work into account.

The parties will cooperate and share information on the development of toolkits and other instruments to help public procurers apply e-accessibility requirements.

The parties have recently agreed to cooperate and exchange information on accessibility to the built environment.

The parties agreed to continue exploring how to more vigorously engage the users and other stakeholders in e-accessibility issues and to foster the use and development of assistive technologies.

The parties agreed to exchange information on measuring progress in providing access to ICT.

Two successful international workshops have been organized within the framework of this dialogue: one on public procurement and one on conformity assessment for ICT and accessibility.

BILATERAL MEETINGS HELD ON E-ACCESSIBILITY

January 15, 2008 in Brussels

October 1, 2007 in Brussels

May 21, 2007 in Washington, D.C.

February 26, 2007 in Brussels

September 27 and 29, 2006 in Washington, D.C.

March 29, 2006 in Brussels

February 27 and 28, 2006 in Washington, D.C.

December 13, 2005 in Brussels