Digital Inclusion

Making mobile phones and services accessible for people with disabilities: a joint report of ITU – The International Telecommunication Union and G3ict – the global initiative for inclusive ICTs

Mobile communications have become ubiquitous, reaching out to the most isolated and least served communities in developed and developing countries alike. At the end of 2011, there were more than 5.9 billion mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions. By the same point in 2013 we expect such subscriptions to outnumber the global population. But this will not mean that everyone has access to mobile telephony. Senior citizens and people with physical or mental disabilities are often unable to access mobile phones because the equipment lacks the necessary accessibility features or because the price of the adapted phones and services remain unaffordable. Considering that 15 per cent of the world's population, or over one billion people, have a disability that affects their access to modern communications, the commercial opportunities for mobile service providers, manufacturers and smart phone application developers are consequently substantial.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that enhanced-accessibility should remain a relatively undeveloped segment of the market. The good news is that the technology to make mobile phones and services accessible is becoming more developed. Screen readers can make mobile phoned accessible for the blind, those with low vision and the illiterate. Visual or vibrating alerts, relay services and hearing aid compatibility devices make mobile phones accessible for the deaf and hard of hearing, while features such as voice recognition and auto text are needed by those with physical disabilities. New accessibility applications for smart phones are being developed and launched practically every day. Affordability nevertheless continues to be a major issue, especially for smart phone solutions.

The widespread adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which requires information and communication technology accessibility of all its States Parties, among which most are ITU Member States, has been stimulating a series of reviews of regulatory and policy measures in order to ensure that they adequately take account of accessibility needs. There are many lessons to be shared.

It is my hope that this report which draws on the accumulated expertise in this area will serve a valuable resource for all mobile stakeholders as they strive to implement successful accessibility features, services, business practices, policies and programmes in their countries. Service providers and handset manufacturers will find clear explanations of the accessibility features and special services needed by people with different kinds of disabilities. The chapter on the growing number of accessible mobile applications should serve as inspiration for "apps" developers worldwide. Business managers can use the report to analyze market demographics and opportunities and learn from the real-life accessibility business cases. Policy makers and regulators will gain enhanced awareness of the CRPD's ICT accessibility requirements, the role of government agencies in ensuring accessibility, and find examples of existing national policy approaches and guidelines on developing and implementing accessibility policies.

BUSINESS PRACTICES IN THE MOBILE PHONE AND SERVICE INDUSTRY

Europe – SFR and Orange

SFR[1] is a French mobile phone company with a customer base of over 20 million. It is a signatory to the voluntary accessibility charter in France. As part of its commitment towards accessibility, SFR provides several products and services for persons with disabilities.

The company offers the Gold Pack bundle of assistive technology software for visually impaired users including a screen-reader, screen magnifier, colour recognizer[2], mobile Daisy player and accessible games.[3] SFR provides Braille billing and allows hearing impaired users to make enquiries and seek information through a sign-language web cam chat[4] three days a week.

The operator has also partnered with other service providers to offer the services of Jaccede.com, a website that offers accessibility related information regarding various places in Paris. The app 'Jaccede Mobile' can be used to find listings

▶ on accessible locations for persons with disabilities. SFR also provides access to a free daily news service in sign language for hearing impaired users in collaboration with WebSourd[5], a web-based sign language news service.

Orange, a subsidiary of France Telecom[6] has implemented several accessibility initiatives for persons with disabilities and elderly customers. It serves 160 million individual customers in 35 countries. Orange's strategy is to embed as many accessibility features in its mainstream products so that they can be activated at no incremental cost by users and products do not need to be retrofitted after they are launched. Its stated strategy is to leverage accessibility features designed for persons with disabilities to benefit all customers.

In addition to this Universal Design approach to product development, Orange created several services for customers with disabilities requiring special services. For example, in 2009, Orange France started an accessible distance-selling service for deaf, hearing-impaired or speech- impaired customers.[7] This service allows customers to contact a customer advisor who is trained in knowledge of telecom products and services for persons with disabilities in real time through internet chat in text or French sign language on a weekly basis. This project, the first of its kind in Europe, was run on an experimental basis and is now live. In the same year, Orange France also partnered with the Paris public transport operator RATP to test BlueEyes, an audio-video tracking system available on mobile phones that makes using the public transport system easier for visually impaired passengers.[8]

Egypt-Etisalat and Vodafone

Egypt-based telecom group Etisalat[9] has entered into a partnership with Code Factory to distribute the latter's screen reader Mobile Speak for its subscribers. Etisalat offers this service across all of its retail stores in the country. Most importantly, Etisalat offers this service free of charge to all blind and visually impaired users. This step is an important recognition of assistive technology not as a value-added application but as a necessary accommodation that service providers should provide anyway.

Vodafone Egypt approaches services to persons with disabilities from a Corporate Social Responsibility standpoint. Among several initiatives for persons with disabilities, it pioneered special services for speech impaired and hard of hearing customers in Egypt with a prepaid rate plan, "Bedoun Kalam," that offers cheaper SMS and video calls for sign language.[10] It successfully deployed dedicated marketing campaigns and partners with disabled persons organizations to reach out to those customer segments.

This joint G3ict/ITU report is the result of several years of inquiry conducted by our organizations on the topic of mobile accessibility and made possible thanks to the dedication and editorial support of the Center for Internet and Society. This cooperation is driven by the same objective: to identify and promote effective mobile solutions to benefit persons with disabilities. The present study compiles and analyses different ways in which mainstream accessible mobile phone technologies and services are already implemented around the world by various stakeholders. It includes a wealth of practical information and case studies which can serve as a foundation to promoting accessible mobile phones and mobile assistive technologies.

The M-Enabling Summit, held in December 2011 in Washington D.C. by G3ict in cooperation with ITU and the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, offered a unique window on the latest innovations and solutions bringing unprecedented benefits to persons with disabilities. We incorporated in the present report some of the latest innovations shared by service providers, technology vendors, application developers or organizations of persons with disabilities during the Summit.

[1] www.sfr.fr/
[2] Tool to identify colours via the phone's camera function
[3] www.sfr.fr/handicap/services/index.jsp
[4] http://assistance.sfr.fr/accueil/contacter/lsf-webcam/en-2398-70308
[5] www.websourd.org/
[6] swww.orange.com/en_EN/group/
[7] www.orange.com/en_EN/responsibility/access_for_all/accessibility/distance_selling.jsp
[8] www.orange.com/en_EN/responsibility/access_for_all/accessibility/blueeyes.jsp
[9] www.medialog.ws/en/node/228
[10] www.vodafone.com.eg/vodafoneportalWeb/en/P600878041288685208951

See the full report at:
www.itu.int/ITU-D/sis/PwDs/Documents/Mobile_Report.pdf

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