Transatlantic e-Accessibility standards cooperation


Standards for information and communication technologies (ICT) such as the web, e-documents, software, and other communication tools are one of the most powerful means of promoting accessibility. By aligning their accessibility standardisation policies, the United States and European Union can create enormous leverage for accessible technologies and possibly lay the groundwork for an international standard.

IN BRIEF

In 2004 the United States and the European Union initiated a process of cooperation to harmonize the standardisation of ICT accessibility requirements in order to avoid conflicts. Following Mandate 376 of the European Commission, the European Standardization Organizations adopted the first European Standard on e-Accessibility in 2014. The U.S. Access Board is still in the process of updating the requirements of its standards, which are part of their regulation issued in 2000 and to be finalized in 2016. The collaboration between the two administrations has resulted in standards that are closely harmonized and compatible.

Facts & Figures

- Regular meetings of transatlantic e-accessibility dialogue have been held (about 10).
- The U.S. Access Board published various drafts to facilitate alignment with the EU standards.
- As of 2014, the European Standard EN 301 549 is available, completed by an online toolkit (http://mandate376.standards.eu/) and an “Accessibility Requirements Generator,” to help public administrations to get the exact information they need. The Standard will soon be available in the languages of 33 European countries.

INNOVATIVE ASPECT

First-time cooperation

In terms of scale, the US–EU cooperation in the field of ICT accessibility is outstanding. Since countries have unique regulatory and standards development processes, standards development takes a long time and the challenge is to ensure that the standards do not develop in different directions.
**CONTEXT**

Information and communication technologies are highly complex, as is the global nature of the ICT industry, which is characterized by fast innovation, a multiplicity of actors, and a general lack of awareness of ICT accessibility issues. To address the situation, cooperation between the United States and the European Union was initiated in 2004, with the aim to harmonize their ICT accessibility standards in terms of how digital applications and services – e.g., computers, smartphones/digital devices, ticketing machines, websites, emails – can be made accessible to persons with disabilities. In 2005 the European Commission issued Mandate 376, which led the European Standardization Organizations to set up a Joint Working Group. The Working Group included U.S. experts and developed the first European Standard on e-Accessibility in 2014 (EN 301 549). From its side, in 2006 the U.S. Access Board formed a federal Advisory Committee, which likewise included European experts, to update the requirements of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and Section 255 of the Communications Act. After issuing advance notices of proposed rulemaking in 2010 and 2011, the Board consulted on the proposed rule (to be finalized by 2016). Disabled peoples organizations participated in both processes.

**QUOTE**

“**Ambitious accessibility standards supported by public procurement policies are the key drivers for an inclusive society. Harmonising these ICT standards will lead to an unprecedented quantity and quality of accessible technologies that are available to all.**” —Rodolfo Cattani, Secretary of the European Disability Forum, Italy

**KEY FEATURES**

The US–EU’s Standards Dialogue on e-Accessibility, launched in 2004, is a bilateral policy measure that in the United States is legally binding (standard and regulation), while in the EU it is a voluntary standard (thus not legally binding). Close collaboration ensured that both policies are aligned across a number of important aspects. For instance, like Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act, which requires that federal agencies procure accessible products, the European Standard on e-Accessibility (EN 301 549) may be used by public bodies in the EU to define accessibility characteristics of ICT. The updated European Public Procurement Directives of 2014 requires public procurers to take into account accessibility criteria when drafting the technical specifications of the products and services they purchase, as does the European Structural and Investment Funds Regulations. In addition, the currently discussed proposal for a European Accessibility Act includes the possibility of using standards as guidance to facilitate conformity by industry. Both standards contain equivalent requirements for the accessibility of user interfaces and refer to W3C/WAI/ WCAG 2.0 as the **de facto**
global standards for harmonisation of web accessibility. Further, both took the functionality approach towards ICT (instead of the product-by-product approach) and insist on the interoperability with (and among) assistive technologies.

**OUTCOME, IMPACT, AND EFFECTIVENESS**

- Two closely harmonized and compatible standards benefit at least 80 million persons with disabilities in the European Union, and 56.7 million in the United States.
- Public procurement amounts to €1 trillion per year; and an increasing amount of these funds are invested in accessible technologies.
- Aligned standards remove ambiguity, streamline transatlantic trade in accessible ICT solutions, and create greater incentives for business to invest in new innovation.

**TRANSFERABILITY, SCALABILITY, AND COST-EFFICIENCY**

When governments procure only accessible ICT, they put enormous pressure on the industry to offer accessible products, since most manufactures will not produce separate products for governments and non-governmental purchasers. Both standards can also be used by private entities. At the European level, the currently discussed proposal for a European Accessibility Act includes the possibility of using the EN 301 549 as guidance to facilitate conformity by industry. In addition, the US–EU cooperation on e-accessibility recently became part of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations. An international standard may be the appropriate next step for a truly international approach to e-accessibility.

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Sources


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