Hong Kong Blind Union

Web Accessibility for People with Visual Handicap

(i)   Introduction

The Hong Kong Blind Union is a self-help organization formed by blind people to represent their views on policies and practices affecting their life.   HKBU's mission is to work for a society with equal opportunities for people with visual handicap in education, employment and as equal citizens. The HKBU is the first organization to promote computer literacy among people and has been running training programmes for the past 20 years.

The HKBU has been concerned about web accessibility as we believe that this is an area where potentially blind people would be able to benefit from the information age.   Inaccessible websites would turn such opportunities into new barriers.

In 1999, HKBU has been appointed as a partner organization of the World Wide Web Consortium on Web Accessibility Initiative, the international authoritative consultants drawing up industrial standards for accessible designs.

In 1999, we approached the Home Affairs Bureau for a comprehensive policy on web accessibility. The HKBU has set up a group of users who are themselves IT professionals with visual handicap to monitor and advise on web accessibility.

(ii)   Web Accessibility For All

Accessible web design is good for people with visual impairment.   It is also good for old people, people using slower computers, dos based browsers, slow telephone lines.   In other words, it is good for business and it ensures open access.

Web accessibility is also good for the image of Hong Kong as an aspiring it and telecommunication hub of the region.   Web accessibility is taken as an integral design standards in major successful web service providers globally. Governments in IT advanced countries adopt it as policy guideline.

In the United Nations' effort to address the emerging IT divide across countries and within countries, web accessibility is one of the central elements of solution.

Web accessibility is regarded as part of a good design by professionals.   It is not a special facility adapted for the blind.   The World Wide Web Consortium on Web Accessibility Initiative (www.w3c.org/wai) promotes a universal design principle, which is good for business.

Design for accessibility is not costly but revamping inaccessible websites is.

(iii)   Government Websites

We welcome and appreciate government's effort to establish an internal guideline for accessible design.   We welcome the progress that half of government's websites are now fully accessible. We also appreciate the openness with which individual government departments have expressed. In preparing a website, we are given the opportunity to test the websites before they are launched.

We urge the government to speed up the process of making all other government websites accessible.

Universal Design and not Text-only Version
We urge the government to review the use of text-only version as the panacea answers to web accessibility.   We believe that text-only version is good but has its limitations.   Firstly, it means that users with visual handicap may not be able to enjoy simultaneous viewing with friends and family members who may benefit from the pictures available at the websites.
Secondly, there is a risk of two versions not matching in all content especially in updating.

Thirdly, it may prove to be costly to maintain and therefore discourage or delay implementation.

Our recommendation is a universal design with alt-text, textual description of pictures and graphics and sufficient colour contrast for low vision users.

We are not, however, say no to text-only version.

Bobby Test

We also urge the government not to adopt the Bobby test as the only or the best evaluation tool. Firstly, Bobby test is designed with English based websites in mind and may not be applicable to Chinese websites.

Secondly, it is possible to fool Bobby test by giving inappropriate or fake textual description such as a meaningless space. In any case, the meaningfulness of a textual label is more important than whether it exists at all.

Thirdly, in cases where a text-only version is provided, Bobby test will render the whole website inaccessible.   In spite of the shortcoming we point out earlier on text-only version, we do not believe that they deserve to be dismissed as inaccessible.   In other words, Bobby test is inappropriately harsh to text-only versions.

User Test

We urge the government to adopt as its practice the w3c guideline together with test by users
 as the most reliable guide.

(iv)   Nongovernmental Websites

Web Accessibility Survey

Hong Kong Blind Union conducted a survey on web accessibility for 100 nongovernmental websites in December 2000. 100 web sites from 5 major concerned areas, information, entertainment, mass media, tertiary institutes and banks were tested. Most of the web sites were partially accessible or inaccessible to visually impaired, while only 21% of the tested web sites are accessible. The major problems identified in the unsatisfactory web sites are the lack of alt-text for hyperlinks and graphical links, flash and the lack of label on pictures.

There are several important but low-cost means for making accessible web sites, namely, alt-text on graphics, enough color contrast and avoid of flash.

Promotion of Best Practice by Professionals

We support the government's effort in promoting best practice by professional web designers.

We welcome the fact that The Hong Kong Association of Web Designers has made the initiative to set up a working group of web accessibility and has approach the HKBU for collaboration.

Strengthening of Guidelines

We welcome the Government's effort in issuing guidelines to public body and subvented organizations to make websites accessible with a definite deadline.

We urge the government to clarify whether tieriary institutions, schools, government owned enterprises such MTR and KCR are included.

We urge the government to take the following steps in pushing web accessibility as an industry standard.

a. Make web accessibility as goal for the IT industry in Hong Kong, the compliance of which sets Hong Kong as a truly enviable hub for IT in the region and in the world.
b. Sets web accessibility as a condition for compliance for all tenderers of government contracts whether or not web sites provision is part of the subject of tendering except where a tenderer does not own a corporate web site at all.
c. Through the Commissioner of banking, make web accessibility of a standard for websites of banks, especially as a core component of e-banking.
d. The same applies to E-finance web sites under supervision of the commissioner for Securities.
e. The same applies to the insurance industry through the Commissioner for insurance.
f. The same applies to property agents and developers.
g. The same applies to Telecommunications, media including new media such as digital TV etc.
h. Issue guideline for other industries as appropriate.

(III) ESD Life

The government introduced ESD Life last year. It would be a golden opportunity for people with visual impairment to live more independently if the services and facilities can meet their needs.

We appreciate that in the design stage, we were consulted on making the websites accessible. accessible design for ESD is especially important when the users are able to fill in lots of forms. Generally, the web site of ESD is accessible. We are reflecting to the operator a defect with regard to it uses of flash and we trust that this will be rectified.   However, since more services will be available on line, it is necessary to keep user test as part of the process of design for accessibility.

We are NOT satisfied   that ESD Life kiosks installed in public areas are adopting touch screentechnology without considering the needs of the visual impaired.   This effectively excludes all users with visual handicap.

We welcome ESD Life operator to introduce magnifying software to enable low vision users to use the kiosks.

We urge Government to mandate ESD Life Operator to introduce speech/Braille display and keyboard as soon as technically possible.

(IV) Resources to People with Visual Impairment

Information Technology (IT) marks a milestone in the history of the self-help and independent livings of people with visual impairment. To facilitate the application of IT among visually impaired, more resources from the government are needed.

Chinese Screen Reader Development
Chinese screen reader software is one of the important equipment. It helps visually impaired access to the functions of other software, type and surf the web efficiently. However, the development, especially for Cantonese users, is still very slow and cannot catch up with the overall development of IT because of the inadequacy of resources. In the present market, the choice and the feasibility of such software are very limited. The performance of the present software is also unsatisfactory and unreliable. It discourages visually impaired to utilize IT. Since Hong Kong is the most advanced and largest city populated with Cantonese speakers, we hope that the government could invest resources and co-operate with the universities and software developers to develop suitable software for local users.

Training
The IT Awareness Program is a foremost step to encourage visually impaired to access to IT. Members from different ages and groups can learn different skills in the program. To help them grasp the comprehensive skills in the application of IT, more varieties of training programs, including primary and advanced courses are needed. Besides, it is necessary to strengthen the training for trainers. The requirement of the trainers are higher than that for sighted learners because these trainers have to be familiar with the equipment for visually impaired and how to teach visually impaired learners. In present situation, there is in lack of such trainers due to the inadequate training.

Subsidy for Purchase of Equipment and Software
Assisting equipment and software for visually impaired users are very expensive. For example, a Power Braille costs about forty thousands. The high cost discourages visually impaired to utilize IT. Although employed visually impaired can apply for funds from the Employ Aids, students, people to be employed and parents are excluded. Subsidy for purchase for the equipment and software is in need.

Support to Schools
In present situation, lack of support to schools is the barrier to the development of integrated education. Schools do not know how to assist and what equipment should be provided to the visually impaired students. Even if the schools have enough money to purchase such equipment, teachers do not know how to use them. Therefore, to facilitate the integrated education, government support to schools is very important.

Support to Employment
We believe that with special equipment, visually impaired are capable of various kinds of jobs. Employment Aid provides funds and the lent of facilities to disabled employees for application. Further development of the services is necessary, especially in the areas of the exploration of new facilities, maintenance of the lent facilities and the promotion of services to employers.

(V) Web Accessibility Consultation Service

In January 2001, The Hong Kong Blind Union formally launched our Consultation Services on Web Accessibility to the public. The services are free of charge. Any organization can send its web site for us to assess whether there is in lack of the features for accessible web sites. After assessing the web site, we will notify the related organization about the result, and make suggestions. If the organization is interested in the equipment of the visually impaired, we will also arrange a visit to The Education and Resource Centre in Kwun Tong for demonstration.
Contact by email is access@hkbu. org. hk.

Conclusion
We appreciate the efforts put by the Government for promotion of web accessibility.   Much more needs to be done. We urge the IT Panel of the Legislative Council to conduct a public hearing as a further step to involve members of the public, the IT industry, the professionals in making websites accessible.   The result will be a standard of IT practice that Hong Kong can feel proud of in the global IT world.

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