

WIDENING THE NET '02 SERIES
**SEMINAR ON "UNIVERSAL WEB ACCESSIBILITY - BUILDING
DIGITAL RAMPS"**



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EnableAll Business Plan **ANNEX-C**

Widening the Net '02 Series

Seminar on "Universal Web Accessibility - Building Digital Ramps"

Date : Wednesday, November 20, 2002

Venue : India International Center, New Delhi

Brief Report



Prof Shintaro Ishijima, President, Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Technology (sitting middle), Prof M.M. Pant, former Pro Vice Chancellor, IGNOU and Prof of Physics, IIT Kanpur (standing left), Mr Arun Mehta, Stephen Hawking Communicator Project (sitting right)

Enabling Dimensions India organized a seminar on Wednesday, November 20, 2002 to create awareness about universal web accessibility amongst a select audience of representatives from government, private and non-government organisations. The seminar was convened by Dr. M. M. Pant, former Pro Vice chancellor of IGNOU, and presided by Prof. Shintaro Ishijima, President, Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Technology and Chairman, Asian Distance Learning initiative of the ANMC-21. The seminar was aimed at sensitizing the audience about the need for equal access to electronic information and the socio-legal, business and technical aspects of this issue.

In his inaugural address Dr. M. M. Pant presented an overview of the issue. He said, "In the knowledge economy, physical abilities have a lesser role to play rather it is the intellectual and creative abilities of the individual that would be of greater significance. "Highlighting the problem of inaccessible websites, Dr. Pant explained how with the increasing use of graphics and multimedia, websites are becoming inaccessible. He said, "Inaccessible web content is denial of information and opportunities required to improve the quality of life. "Highlighting the benefits of developing accessible web-content Dr. Pant said, "When we are talking about web-design for the disabled, we are talking about everyone. The reach of such content goes far beyond this community, for example audio-content developed for visually-challenged can be used to reach out to millions of illiterate people in rural areas." He pointed towards the W3C/WAI web accessibility guidelines, to show that standards already exist for web developers to make their web sites accessible.

Prof. Shintaro Ishijima, described how developing web content for the disabled is relevant for others, by illustrating how language-barriers encountered by people in a foreign country is a disability similar to the learning-challenged or the illiterate. In his concluding remarks, Prof. Ishijima said, "If I had missed this seminar I would have missed very important information on accessibility and its impact on distance learning programmes." He said, "Universal web accessibility is most essential for good quality of life. It is our duty to provide an easy way to access quality education, and this is highly relevant in the context of the distance learning project that we are working on."

Mr. Prakash Kumar, IT secretary, Delhi Government, informed the audience that Delhi government is one of the six states to have enforced the Right to Information Act, and that it recognizes the right of every citizen to access the information. Speaking about the initiatives taken by the Delhi Government in providing information to the public suo moto, 40 websites have been developed to provide information on various aspects of governance. "We will be making these websites accessible" he said. Mr. Kumar also spoke about the challenges in using Internet extensively in the light of lack of preparedness of the various departments and lack of skilled people in these departments in handling emails and online requests. He announced, "We will start with social welfare department to make their website compatible with the W3C guidelines."



Ms Anjali Arora (middle), India's first blind Supreme Court Lawyer arguing a case for Universal Web Accessibility citing e.g. of problem with online railway reservations and non-talking ATMs

Ms. Anjali Arora, India's first visually challenged Supreme Court lawyer, spoke on the issue of legal provision and support for the disabled in the context of web accessibility in India. She said, "There is no debate on whether or not legal right to web content should be provided, it ought to be provided to all." She compared the provisions of People with Disabilities Act, 1995 with those provided in American with Disabilities Act to highlight the inadequacies of the act in the context of changing technological developments taking place, such as Internet, computers, etc. She enumerated various barriers to information for disabled persons in their daily lives such as printed bills, inaccessible online forms, inaccessible ATMs and Online Railway Reservation System not having provision for disability concessions. She said that the main problem is that the act does not guarantee full-participation by the disabled person. "My self-reliance on my tools and equipment is the best for the society in general. By making me dependent not only is the system wasting its resources, it is also depriving me of the opportunities for availing various government and marketing schemes, employment opportunities, etc. The only way to do this is to make information available electronically and in a completely accessible format."



Mr. Charu Jadav (right corner), India's former Blind Chess Champion presenting how assistive technology allows him to play Chess. It is amazing to note that since he cant see the board he remembers every piece on the board even after 100 moves have been made

Presenting the end-user perspective Mr. Charu Jadav, visually challenged former national Chess champion, spoke about the challenges faced by differently-abled in accessing electronic information. He also demonstrated the how the visually challenged play chess using computers. "I remember every move of a game and record it after coming back." He said, "Everyone has limitations and they work around them. Like that the disabled also have some limitation and we also have to work around that. Web accessibility will be a great help to us."

Mr. Arun Mehta of Radiophony spoke about the voice synthesizing software that his company is developing for Prof. Stephen Hawking and the challenges faced in this process. Mr. Mehta said, "In addressing the problem of such extreme form of disability, we have learnt more about the challenges for specific disabilities." Mr. Mehta announced, "We would like to start an institute for physically disabled, and here we would like to combine the electronic and mechanical engineering disciplines to develop low cost access devices."

In his closing address, Dr. Pant announced several steps that will be taken to further this initiative on promoting universal web accessibility. "We will be setting up a larger group of organisations to further the cause of equal access to electronic information. We are also organizing a training workshop for web developers to educate them how to develop accessible websites. This workshop will be held on December 3rd on the occasion of the World Disability Day. We will also be approaching IT secretaries of various state governments to ensure that at least the government websites are made universally accessible.", Dr Pant said.

Seminar Program

REGISTRATION : 9:00 a.m. - 9:30 a.m.

INTRODUCTION : 9:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.

- Presided by Prof Shintaro Ishijima, President, Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Technology
- Overview of Universal Web Accessibility: Dr M.M. Pant (former Pro Vice Chancellor, IGNOU)
- End-user Perspective: Mr Charu Jadav, Visually impaired former National Chess Champion

Tea/Coffee break : 10:30 a.m. - 10:45 a.m.

SESSION-1: THE SOCIO-LEGAL DIMENSION: 10:45-11:45

- Chairperson's Observations- Prof P.C. Juneja, Director, VIPS Law School
- Legal Provision and Support for the Disabled: Ms Anjali Arora, First Visually Impaired Lawyer, Supreme Court
- Can Right to Information be complete without Equal Access to Electronic Information: Mr Prakash Kumar, Spl Secretary I.T., Govt of Delhi
- Towards an Accessible, Inclusive and Humane Society in the Internet Age: Ms Hansa Kaul Dhar, VIPS Law School

SESSION-2: THE OPPORTUNITY DIMENSION: 11:50 a.m. - 12:25 p.m.

- Chairperson's Observations
- India's Experience in using IT for the visually impaired and the mentally challenged: Dr Ratan Dutta, former Chief of CRAY Supercomputer Project
- Hawking Communicator: Mr. Arun Mehta, Radiophony
- Distance Learning & Accessibility: IGNOUs Experience: Dr Prabha Chawla, IGNOU

SESSION-3: OPEN SESSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE: 12:25 p.m. - 12:50 p.m.

- Demos of emerging assistive technologies
- Observations from the floor

CLOSING REMARKS : 12:50 p.m. - 1:00 p.m.

LUNCH