

## **E-INCLUSION in the European Union with special emphasis to AUSTRIA**

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In the wake of the change from the industrial society to a modern, knowledge-based information society, information and communication technologies (ICT) have penetrated almost all areas of social and political life. Globalization itself has only been made possible by the rapid progress of ICT, which will continue to fuel its further development.

**ICT should help create more economic growth and more jobs, more independence and better chances in life and quite generally enhance solidarity within our society.**

In connection with the mid-term evaluation of its i2010 initiative, the European Commission has stated quite clearly that, as far as the information society is concerned, Europe cannot afford a two-tier society. Neither economic nor social considerations could justify the acceptance of a situation where one part of the population possesses the necessary equipment and qualifications for participation in the information society – and another large part doesn't. Innovative concepts and solutions can and should be designed in order to ensure the e-Inclusion of people with a lower educational level and income, of senior citizens and of persons with special needs.

The lack of access to ICT is limiting a person's chances of participating in social, economic and political life and may even lead to social marginalization. If the worst comes to the worst, we could be facing a (digital) divide between those who participate in the information and knowledge society via ICT and those who are excluded from it. Yet ICT can help senior citizens to lead an autonomous, secure, healthy and socially integrated life within their own four walls for as long as possible.

### **Riga Declaration 2006: e-Inclusion**

The EU states agreed to implement an e-Inclusion policy focusing on the following core themes: [http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/einclusion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/einclusion/index_en.htm)

- ✓ **paying attention to the needs of senior citizens;**
- ✓ reduction of digital divides due to geo-graphical factors;
- ✓ improvement of accessibility and avail-ability of ICT for people with disabilities;
- ✓ enhancement of digital skills in general;
- ✓ improvement of the online services offered by the public authorities;
- ✓ Use of ICT to ensure everyone is included in the information society.

### **Commission laid particular emphasis on the following aspects:**

- Including 30-40% of the population in ICT world
- ICT mainstreaming
- Saving costs and forcing a profitable economic sector
- basic **prerequisites**: a broadband connection, non-discriminatory access to all websites and the necessary digital skills

### **Accessibility of Internet services**

All EU member states have acknowledged the Guidelines of the Web Accessibility Initiative of the W3C (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) to be the applicable standard regarding accessibility of public Internet pages.

In Austria, the goal of providing older people and disabled persons with unimpeded access to all official websites of the public authorities has been set out in section 1 paragraph 3 of the E-Government-Act; this means that the authorities are obliged to comply with international standards regarding web accessibility. On the occasion of the ISPA-Internet Summit Austria 2008, the official Austrian Preparatory Conference for the e-Inclusion Ministerial Conference 2008, these principles were formulated and presented to the public.

### **AUSTRIAN PRINCIPLES REGARDING E-INCLUSION**

ISPA-Internet Summit Austria 2008: "Grabbing opportunities! - Internet for an integrative information society" (Vienna, Imperial Palace, October 2, 2008)

### I. Availability

Both in the cities and in rural areas, all citizens should have a reasonably priced broadband Internet connection at their disposal. Technical and social barriers must be prevented. According to Statistics Austria (February – March 2008), approximately 76% of Austrian households are equipped with a computer, and 71% of all households have access to the Internet; 50% of these have a broadband Internet connection.

**Suggestions:** In order to be able to offer low-threshold access and affordable broadband base technology for everyone, all broadband expansion projects should pay special attention to the needs and requirements of marginalized regions and social groups. In these economically disadvantaged areas, expansion should be promoted by means of basic regulatory measures and suitable supporting measures.

### II. Openness and right to information

The Internet should be open to all strata of and groups within the population. No one should be excluded from or hampered in accessing it because of his/her social, cultural, ethnic or geographic background or origin. Freedom of expression includes the freedom of speech and the freedom to receive and communicate messages or ideas, without interference from the public authorities and without regard to frontiers.

As a rule, access to the Internet involves a great deal of expense: first of all, the necessary equipment (hard- and software) must be acquired, and then there is the subsequent operational cost. As a result, persons living on a low income or on meager transfer payments (social security benefits) encounter barriers that are almost impossible to overcome without help.

**Suggestions:** The prerequisites for the granting of governmental subsidies should be adapted to the goals to be achieved by the said subsidies, i.e., to ensuring that persons at risk of poverty are provided with access to the new media of communication. It should be examined to what extent the setting up of public Internet connections (as, for instance, on the municipal level) that can be used at a reasonable price could be extended. In order to facilitate access to the Internet for people with a low income. In such facilities, help and advice could also be provided, so that persons who are not familiar with the medium could be given a chance to overcome their distrust of the Internet.

### III. Usability

Software and Internet content must be designed in such a way as to be neatly arranged, clear and easily comprehensible. This also includes compliance with the minimum standards of accessibility. It should be ensured that suitable training opportunities for the handling of the medium "Internet" (media skills) are made available to all age and social groups within the population. In Austria, the law prohibits discrimination against any person because of a disability. The relevant statutes stipulate that there must be no barriers to access and provide sanctions for non-compliance. Generally speaking, it must be said that few people are sufficiently informed with regard to the special needs of disabled people in connection with the provision of services.

**Suggestions:** Providers of goods and services should focus on disabled people as customers and target groups to a greater extent. In this way, a win-win situation could be created for everyone concerned. This should be supported by suitable public relations efforts on the part not only of the government, but also of the professional associations of those engaged in business and trade.

### IV. User protection and security

User protection must be increased by augmenting legal certainty on the Internet. Safe communication and data transfer must be guaranteed by way of fixed standards.

Trading activities via the Internet are constantly increasing. In 2007, as much as 35.8 % of the population were already shopping on the Internet, and approximately 60% of all enterprises offer the possibility of purchasing their products via the Internet. In the interests of consumer protection, consumers should be warned to be extremely careful when entering

into e-commerce transactions. Information and practical tips may be obtained not only from the consumer advice centers of the Austrian Association for Consumer Information (*Verein für Konsumenteninformation*) and in the *Arbeiterkammern* (Chambers of Labor), but also from the Association Internet Ombudsman (*Verein Internet Ombudsmann*), which is supported by the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs and Consumer Protection.

Since there will always be persons who cannot use the Internet (such as persons with pronounced learning disabilities or very old people) or who may be prevented from access temporarily (as, for instance, when their computers are out of order), alternative forms of transaction must be maintained without those using them having to pay an extra price for such alternatives.

**Suggestions:** It must be ensured that no one is placed at a financial disadvantage because he/she chooses not to purchase goods and services via the Internet.

#### V. Data protection

As a matter of principle, every individual is entitled to dispose of his/her personal data at will. The conflict between the fundamental right to data protection and the necessary interference by the government, as, for instance, for the purposes of the prosecution of criminals, must be dealt with on the basis of the principle of proportionality. Everyone is entitled to non-disclosure of his/her personal data, particularly where such data refer to his/her private or family life. Besides the right to non-disclosure, the fundamental right to data protection also includes the right to information, correction of inaccurately recorded data and cancellation of data processed unlawfully, in accordance with the relevant statutory provisions. The fundamental right to data protection applies to personal data irrespective of the technical medium (paper, Internet, telephone, etc.) used and the way (storing, linking, transmitting, etc.) in which such data are processed.

**Suggestions:** The fundamental right to data protection must not be undermined along the lines of "I've got nothing to hide, anyway ...". Recordings of language and images by means of video in public areas must always be made openly; they must be publicly announced and may be used only for a clearly de-fined purpose. The use of such data must be supervised regularly by a data protection officer.

#### VI. Inclusive e-Government

All e-Government facilities must be adapted carefully to the needs and capacities of the customers. Services that are of particular importance to customers should be prioritized. The use of the "citizen card" (*Bürgerkarte*), electronic delivery, e-accessibility and usability of administration facilities offered on the Internet – also on the municipal and provincial level – are intended to facilitate and improve people's dealings with the administration. e-Inclusion and/or inclusive e-Government must be regarded from a comprehensive point of view. All measures and initiatives must be coordinated and synchronized.

**Suggestions:** Target groups to which special attention should be paid are senior citizens in general, employees, persons with disabilities, persons with a low level of education, migrants, people with a low income; Special attention must be paid to digital literacy and/or the acquisition of digital skills, especially in the case of young people at risk of social exclusion (those from low-income families, sons and daughters of migrants); E-accessibility and usability of websites are of fundamental importance.

#### VII. Participation and co-determination (e-participation)

The Internet should be more widely used as an interactive communication tool to include citizens in the democratic opinion-forming, planning and decision-making processes.

The added value of the new media in relation to democracy is quite obvious. The new forms of information processing, communication and interaction made possible by ICT can be used in multiple ways for strengthening democracy. Information is the basis for the formation of mature opinions. Transparency and data protection are indispensable basic requirements for creating trust in the participants. The Internet offers flexibility independent of location and time, user-friendliness, target-group orientation and, last but not least, interactivity. The new

forms of information processing, communication and interaction made possible by ICT can be used in multiple ways for strengthening democracy.

**Suggestions:** As far as possible, ensure the participation and cooperation of all social groups and sectors (citizens, the economy and NGOs); User-friendliness and constant maintainability of all projects must be guaranteed; Electronically supported participation processes must not, under any circumstances, re-place other forms of communication.

#### **AUSTRIAN BEST PRACTICES** (SELECTION of platform help.gv.at)

*Online Help-site of the Federal Government for transactions with the authorities; Public MultiMedia Stations; Platform for Equal Opportunities for Disabled Person; Voice-activated Cash Dispenser for the Visually Impaired; Ways to ensure Equality of Opportunity; Office for Integration Projects; Life Tool – Computer Aided Communication ECDL Without Barriers; ERP Software for Blind and Visually Impaired Persons; Municipal Informatics Centre of the Province of Carinthia; Chronology of the Holocaust; Platform Football 4 all; Seniorkom.at – School Project; Benefit – New Technologies for Senior Citizens; Smart Home – ICT for the Use of Senior Citizens; Austrian Youth Portal; PoliPedia.at – Youth Participation in the Social Web; Learn Forever – Incorporate Learning in the Day-to-Day Lives of Educationally Disadvantaged Women; IICC – New Ways of Teaching in Hospital; EuRegio Girls Day.*

#### **Accessibility of HELP.gv.at**

The inter-administrative platform HELP.gv.at provides information on handling administrative points of interest in Austria via the Internet and also allows electronic transactions. Information about official channels as well as required documents, costs, deadlines and downloadable forms & templates are permanently available. HELP.gv.at has been conceived as a link between public authorities and citizens & entrepreneurs, on which criteria such as transparency, clarity, comprehensibility and focusing on the main points are always given priority. All relevant information is available also in the English language.

HELP.gv.at offers various advantages: It is permanently available – twenty-four hours a day; citizens are granted the possibility of either preparing their administrative needs in advance or of transacting them entirely from home. As a result, employees require less time off to take care of their administrative needs, since they are no longer obliged to visit the administrative authorities during opening hours, 'which indirectly benefits the economy. Public authorities are offering a new collaborative platform for communication with their clients, the workload of public servants is reduced and - last but not least - productivity is increased due to fewer routine tasks. In addition to the advantages already mentioned, every public authority is now entitled to crosslink with HELP.gv.at and benefit free of charge from ongoing developments such as new topics or online transactions/forms. Furthermore, the authorities are able to include HELP contents in their websites by means of Content Syndication.

From the very beginning, HELP.gv.at fully implemented all criteria for accessibility, drawing attention to this important issue in the implementation of the portal. All parts of the contents of the portal fulfil the criteria established in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, so that the portal corresponds to a Conformance Level rating of "Triple A" (WAI AAA).

**e-Inclusion in Austria HELP.gv.at received the "Goldene BIENE" Award 2006 as one of the best barrier-free German-language websites.**