

IS4ALL: A new Working Group promoting universal design in Information Society Technologies

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IS4ALL (Information Society for All) – is a new EC-funded project aiming to advance the principles and practice of Universal Access in Information Society Technologies, by establishing a wide, interdisciplinary and closely collaborating network of experts (Working Group) to provide the European IT&T industry in general, and Health Telematics in particular, with a comprehensive code of practice on how to appropriate the benefits of universal design.

Background

The International Scientific Forum “Towards an Information Society for All” was launched in 1997, as an international ad hoc group of experts sharing common visions and objectives, namely the advancement of the principles of Universal Access in the emerging Information Society. The Forum held three workshops to establish interdisciplinary discussion, a common vocabulary to facilitate exchange and dissemination of knowledge, and to promote international co-operation. The 1st workshop took place in San Francisco, USA, August 29, 1997, and was sponsored by IBM. The 2nd took place in Crete, Greece, June 15-16, 1998 and the 3rd took place in Munich, Germany, August 22-23, 1999. The latter two events were partially funded by the European Commission. The Forum has produced two White Papers^{1,2}, while a third one is in preparation. They report on an evolving international R&D agenda focusing on the development of an Information Society acceptable to *all* citizens, based on the principles of *universal design*. The proposed agenda addresses technological and user-oriented issues, application domains, and support measures. The Forum has also elaborated on the proposed agenda by identifying challenges in the field of human-computer interaction, and clusters of concrete recommendations for international collaborative R&D activities. Moreover, the Forum has addressed the concept of *accessibility* beyond the traditional fields of inquiry (e.g., assistive technologies, built environment, etc), in the context of selected mainstream Information Society Technologies, and important application domains with significant impact on society as a whole. Based on the success of its initial activities, the Forum has proposed to the European Commission the establishment, on a formal basis, of a wider, interdisciplinary and closely collaborating network of experts (Working Group), which has been now approved for funding.

Universal Design

Universal Design postulates the design of products or services that are accessible, usable and, therefore, acceptable by potentially everyone, everywhere and at any time. Although the results of early work dedicated to promoting Universal Access to the Information Society³ are slowly finding their way into industrial practices (e.g., certain mobile telephones, point-of-sale terminals, public kiosks, user interface development toolkits), a common platform for researchers and practitioners in Europe to collaborate and arrive at applicable solutions is still missing. Collaborative efforts are therefore needed to collect, consolidate and validate the distributed wisdom at the European as well as the international level, and apply it in application areas of critical importance, such as Health Telematics, catering for the population at large, and involving a variety of diverse target user groups (e.g., doctors, nurses, administrators, patients). Emerging interaction platforms, such as advanced desktop-oriented environments (e.g., advanced GUIs, 3D graphical toolkits, visualisers), and mobile

¹ Stephanidis, C., Salvendy, G., et al., (1998). Toward an Information Society for All: An International R&D Agenda, *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 10(2), 107-134.

² Stephanidis, C., Salvendy, G., et al., (1999). Toward an Information Society for All: HCI challenges and R&D recommendations, *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 11(1), 1-28.

³ For a review see Stephanidis, C. and Emiliani, P-L. (1999). “Connecting” to the information society: a European perspective, *Technology and Disability*, 10(1), 21-44.

platforms (e.g., palmtop devices), enabling ubiquitous access to electronic data from anywhere, and at anytime, are expected to bring about radical improvements in the type and range of Health Telematics services. Accounting for the accessibility, usability and acceptability of these technologies at an early stage of their development life cycle is likely to improve their market impact as well as the actual usefulness of the end products.

IS4ALL

The IS4ALL Working Group aims to provide European industry with appropriate instruments to approach, internalise and exploit the benefits of universal access, with particular emphasis on Health Telematics. Toward this objective, IS4ALL will develop a comprehensive *code of practice* (e.g., enumeration of methods, process guidelines) consolidating existing knowledge on Universal Access in the context of Information Society Technologies, as well as *concrete recommendations* for emerging technologies (e.g., emerging desktop and mobile platforms), with particular emphasis on their deployment in Health Telematics. IS4ALL will also undertake a mix of *outreach activities* to promote Universal Access principles and practice, including workshops and seminars targeted to mainstream IT&T industry.

IS4ALL is a multidisciplinary Working Group co-ordinated by the Institute of Computer Science of the Foundation for Research and Technology – Hellas (ICS-FORTH), Greece. The membership includes: Microsoft Healthcare Users Group Europe (MS-HUGe); the European Health Telematics Association (EHTEL); Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche – Istituto di Ricerca sulle Onde Elettromagnetiche (CNR-IROE) Italy; Forschungszentrum Informationstechnik GmbH (GMD), Germany; Institut National de Recherche en Informatique et Automatique – Laboratoire lorrain de recherche en informatique et ses applications (INRIA), France; and Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft zur Foerderung der angewandten Forschung e.V. - Institut für Arbeitswirtschaft und Organisation (FhG-IAO), Germany.