

Memorandum of Understanding

This document represents an agreement among the following parties:

- ABLEDATA (U.S.A.) – with reference to the ABLEDATA project
- Centro Estatal de Autonomía Personal y Ayudas Técnicas (CEAPAT- IMSERSO) (Spain) – with reference to the “Catalogo de Ayudas Técnicas” project
- Disabled Living Foundation (DLF) (U.K.) – with reference to the DLFDATA project
- Danish Centre for Technical Aids for Rehabilitation and Education (Denmark) – with reference to the HMI-BASEN project
- Institute for Rehabilitation Research (iRv) (Netherlands) – with reference to the Hupmiddelen Wijzer project
- Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft (Germany) – with reference to the REHADAT project
- Fondazione Don Carlo Gnocchi Onlus (Italy) – with reference to the SIVA PORTAL project

The purpose of this agreement is to formalize and to clarify the relationship among the assistive technology information providers that are party to this memorandum of understanding (MOU), with reference to the above-mentioned assistive technology information project.

A basic structure for an international working group will be defined, and several areas for cooperation and collaboration—networking, database structure and content, technical compatibility, and administrative issues—will be described in detail.

I. Background

Over the past three decades, several organizations throughout the European Union, the United States and other countries in the world have developed and maintained national databases with information on assistive technology (A.T.), this term encompassing any equipment or technology-based product or service that compensate for functional limitations or help people with disabilities to better cope with daily life activities, education, work, leisure and social life.

The projects that have produced these assistive technology information databases have taken varied approaches to the many aspects of database development and maintenance (e.g., data collection, database structure, indexing/classification of listed products, dissemination methods).

In recent years, the continued development of the global economy has broken down the national barriers between assistive technology markets, and the expansion of the Internet in both content and user base have created unprecedented opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among the assistive technology information projects in several areas.

Representatives of the main projects concerned with assistive technology information met in Milano on 3-4 July, 2003 at the invitation of Fondazione Don Gnocchi Onlus to discuss collaboration prospects. Among other things, the meeting led to the decision to set up a collaboration framework based on a memorandum of understanding that was drafted, discussed and then agreed in this form by all parties in Dublin on 2 September, 2003.

➤ **Database Content and Structure**

The development of a single market within the European Union has affected also assistive technologies. The AT market is increasingly becoming a single market at European level and this extends also to the United States and the rest of the world in most areas. As such, all of the assistive technology information databases now offer some common content. The intersection between the content of the databases provides the impetus for the development of a coherent approach to data collection and for the classification of products. Also, many of the projects use identical or substantially similar technical platforms to host their respective databases so there is an opportunity for the databases to share information relatively easily across the Internet.

➤ **User Base**

As Internet usage has increased, the user base accessing each assistive technology information database has added an international component that is increasing both in its size and in the frequency of use. The development of a user base that crosses national boundaries mirrors the development an international A.T. market. People with disabilities throughout Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world share many concerns and issues, and increased cooperation and coordination among assistive technology information projects can enhance the provision of product information and other key information resources that address these issues.

➤ **Social Issues**

Throughout Europe and in the United States, the legal rights of people with disabilities have been recognized and enhanced in recent years. People with disabilities have assumed increased responsibility in their own lives, including a more active role in the selection of the assistive technology that they use on a daily basis. Providing accurate and complete information on the A.T. available to people with disabilities is a key part of providing them with the opportunity to take control of that important aspect of their lives.

➤ **Relationships with Assistive Technology Manufacturers and Distributors**

The acquisition of accurate and current product information is an ongoing challenge for each of the assistive technology information projects. The projects can leverage their shared, international user base that accesses A.T. information from multiple projects over the Internet to offer increased exposure to A.T. companies with products listed on any one of the A.T. information databases. A.T. companies now have increased incentive to provide product information and to update that information so that they can reach a truly global market.

➤ **Political and Funding Issues**

Government funding for assistive technology information databases is limited in all nations. Most assistive technology information projects are supported by public funding however, many also receive funds in varying amounts from private sources and income generated by fees for certain services or products provided to the public. Nevertheless, every project could provide more and better quality information on assistive technology with more funding. Cooperation among A.T. information projects can help individual projects to expand the services and resources that they offer at minimal cost. Projects can also share methods they use to improve efficiency in order to make the most of the funding that they receive.

As the global economy becomes more interdependent and the communication and cultural barriers among people with disabilities in various countries are eliminated by the increased usage of the Internet, the potential benefits of cooperation and coordination among the assistive technology information projects appear to be numerous and attainable. Thus, the projects signing this memorandum have agreed to form a permanent working group to seize upon these opportunities to improve the quality and quantity of information that we offer to the public and to enhance our the efficiency and effectiveness of our internal policies and processes.

II. Description of Collaborating Organizations

Each of the entities participating in the working group shares the following characteristics:

- Each organization maintains a database of assistive technology information.
- Each database provides information on assistive technology and related issues.
- Each database aims at ensuring national coverage of assistive products available in the organization's respective nation.
- Each database is available to be searched using the Internet.

Only one project from each nation will be granted membership in the working group. Should there be more than one entity that maintains a database of assistive technology information in a nation, the member organization from that nation will be responsible for representing the interests of all assistive technology information resources from its home nation.

III. Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: Establish a forum for cooperation among international assistive technology information projects.

The initial aim of the working group is to provide a structured forum in which member organizations can develop a relationship that promotes coordination and cooperation that enhances the ability of members to collect and disseminate information related to assistive technology. Within this forum, member organizations can discuss issues of common interest including ways to maintain and expand their assistive technology information databases and to disseminate that information more efficiently and effectively.

Objectives

1. Hold an annual meeting of all member organizations to discuss activities of the previous year and to establish goals and objectives for future cooperative activities.
2. Ensure free access to all the other members to all information contained in each member's information system.
3. Establish an email listserv to facilitate electronic communication among members.
4. Develop a policy for linking among the Web sites of the member organizations.
5. Compile and maintain a chart (or database) that compares each member's (a) product information and other resources; (b) data collection policies and methods; (c) data quality assurance policies and methods; (d) information dissemination policies and methods; and (e) product classification terminology.
6. Establish a policy for adding organizations to the working group.
7. Develop and maintain an international glossary of English terms related to assistive technology.
8. Share information and expertise on Web accessibility on a regular basis, and explore opportunities to participate in the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C/WAI).
9. Share information and expertise on Web site and database navigation strategies and the presentation of information in a manner that is logical and useful for people with a variety of disabilities.

Goal 2: Develop strategies for sharing assistive technology information.

The members of the working group will seek methods through which they can share, among themselves and among their users, the information they collect on assistive products.

Objectives

1. Establish common guidelines regarding the collection of product data.
2. Develop a method for regular (e.g., monthly, semi-monthly) exchange of information on new A.T. products.
3. Establish specifications for database structure or for search query language that will allow for shared searching of the assistive technology information databases of all working group members.
4. Adopt a common standard for classifying assistive products (such as ISO 9999).
5. Explore the use of automatic translation software to convert information in a given database from the language of the host country to the language of the user.

Goal 3: Leverage the combined resources of member organizations to enhance their ability to collect product information, develop new private and public funding sources, and enhance their information dissemination efforts.

Together, the working group will possess more assistive technology information assets and a larger user base than any previous organization in the assistive technology field. The working group can leverage these resources to provide better service to the public, improve their ability to collect current information on assistive products from manufacturers and distributors, and apply for funding to support further initiatives of the working group.

Objectives

1. As part of the guidelines regarding the collection of product data (Goal 2, Objective 1), develop a shared, coordinated strategy for acquiring product information from assistive technology manufacturers and distributors.
2. Develop a strategy for sharing information resources other than product information (e.g. Rehadat's case studies, ABLEDATA/DLF fact sheets, SIVA experiences) offered by member organizations.

3. Explore alternative sources of funding for which the working group (as opposed to its individual member organizations) could apply to support the cooperative activities of the group. These funding sources may include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - European Union
 - Other government funding sources
 - Private foundations
 - Assistive technology companies.

IV. Operation of the Working Group

A. Annual Meeting

As stated in Objective 1 of Goal 1, the working group will meet each year at a date and location agreed to by at least 4/5 of the group.

The meeting will be hosted by a member organization of the working group. The host organization will provide appropriate and accessible meeting space. The host organization will not be required to provide funding for the travel and accommodations for the representatives of the other member organizations.

The host organization will be responsible for keeping minutes of the meeting. These minutes will be made available to all members (including those unable to attend) in an accessible, electronic format.

B. Leadership

The chair of the working group will rotate among the member organizations on an annual basis, the term starting on January 1st and ending on December 31st of each year. The chair will be selected by a majority vote of the member organizations with at least 2/3 of the members voting. Members that are unable to attend the meeting can appoint a proxy to cast their vote, or they may submit their vote to the outgoing chair via email, fax or regular letter before the election takes place.

Member organizations will be invited to nominate candidates to chair the working group at least two weeks before the annual meeting. Nominations will be submitted to the current chair who will be responsible for distributing the slate of candidates to all members at least one week prior to the annual meeting.

It is agreed that for the first leadership term ending 31 December, 2004 the group will be chaired by Renzo Andrich of SIVA.

C. Representation of the Member Organizations

Each member organization will be required to designate a person who represents that organization on the working group. The designee will be the member organization's point of contact with the working group and will receive all communications from the chair and other members of the working group. Unless otherwise stated, it will be assumed that the designee has the authority to speak for his/her organization in matters relating to the working group.

D. Addition of Qualifying Assistive Technology Information Organizations to the Working Group

Organizations other than the original signatories to this memorandum that meet the criteria in Section II may be added to the working group with the approval of a simple majority of the current members of the working group. Consideration of candidates for membership in the working group will take place at the group's annual meeting or by a process to which the members agree.

Organizations that desire to join the working group may apply to the current chair of the group, or they may be nominated by any member of the working group.

We the undersigned – duly authorized by our respective organizations – agree to form the working group described above. The working group will be known henceforth as the Worldwide Alliance of Assistive Technology Information Providers.

Signed on 2 September, 2003.

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