

Accessibility as a criterion for supplier selection

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ABSTRACT

In procurements of information and communication technology, accessibility should be a criterion for awarding of contracts. The products and services to be procured should be required to satisfy a set of accessibility criteria. Requirements on the supplier's technical capacity should include knowledge of and an organisation assigned for accessibility issues. This paper gives recommendations on supplier requirements. The paper is based on the results of the EU project ACCENT.

Keywords

Accessibility, procurement, supplier selection

well as from more general changes in functioning and ability that arise as people get older.

The ACCENT reports are available and downloadable at <http://www.statskontoret.se/accnteng.htm>.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is an extract from "Guidelines for Procurement of Accessible Personal Computer Systems", a report from the ACCENT project, part-funded under the EU's SPRITE-S2 programme and by the Nordic Development Centre for Rehabilitation Technology. The participants in ACCENT were:

- Clas Thorén Consulting, Ekerö, Sweden (Coordinator),
- Work Research Centre Ltd, Dublin, Ireland,
- Centre for Accessibility (Danish Centre), Århus, Denmark, and
- Swedish Agency for Administrative development (Statskontoret), Stockholm, Sweden.

The aim of the ACCENT project is to help public sector organisations to take account of accessibility requirements, both of their employees and of the users of their public information services, when they (the public sector organisations) are purchasing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) equipment, systems and services. Accessibility requirements arise as a result of the temporary or permanent disabilities that we may all experience during the course of our lives, as

2 WHAT IS ACCESSIBILITY?

"Accessible" ICT products and services are those that are designed and implemented in a way that allows disabled people or older people to use them in the same way as anyone else, irrespective of their disabilities or age-related changes. From a procurement point of view, two main requirements need to be addressed in order to ensure the accessibility of the ICT being purchased:

- "design for all" (where the product or service is designed to take as wide a range of users and circumstances as possible into account)
- "connectability" (where the product or service includes a capability of being connected to the assistive devices that may be needed by some disabled people or older people in order to use them).

These two approaches include accessibility as part of any procurement of ICT intended for general use by employees or the public, and are the main way to address accessibility in public procurement of ICT.

2.1 Equipment and services for use by the general public

In Europe today a large and growing percentage of the population (about 20% or almost 80 million people) are aged 65 years or older, have a disability, or both. Any public sector organisation that provides ICT-based services aimed at the general public has a duty to ensure that such services are accessible to all citizens. Sometimes such services are delivered via equipment (e.g. public information kiosks) that has been procured and provided by the organisation itself. The design, development or delivery of the service may also involve the procurement of services (e.g. Web site design) from suppliers. In these cases the customer has a duty to ensure that the procured equipment and/or services are accessible to all. This can only be achieved by including accessibility requirements within the specifications for the equipment or services being procured.

2.2 Equipment and services for use by staff

The first point to note is that many staff - in fact, many more than the organisation is likely to be aware of - will have accessibility requirements at any given point in time. Procurers may traditionally have taken a quite restricted view of what accessibility entails, viewing it as something that applies only to people who have very obvious visual, hearing or mobility impairments. However, the proportion of the workforce with accessibility requirements covers a much wider range than this and, in fact, some level of disability can be expected as a natural element of almost everyone's life cycle. This includes older workers who may experience changes in their sensory, motor and cognitive abilities, people with temporary impairments such as having broken an arm or having forgotten one's spectacles, and anyone who happens to be in certain situations which may cause transient difficulties, such as noisy environments.

Although reliable statistics are hard to find, it is probably reasonable (if a little conservative) to suggest that somewhere between 10% and 15% of public sector employees are likely to have some level of accessibility requirements at any point in time. In fact, these figures are likely to increase in the future as a result of demographic and labour market trends. The rapid ageing of the European population will significantly increase the number of older workers and, due to labour market shortages, is also likely to increase the number of disabled people at work.

3 CRITERIA FOR SUPPLIER SELECTION

In many cases, procurement of ICT products and services result in middle- or long-term contracts with one or more suppliers. Suppliers often want to act as

"business partner" to the customer, a role where the supplier becomes familiar with the customer's businesses and suggests ICT solutions as support of the businesses, often a key element of the services provided by the customer. If accessibility is intended to be a feature of the services, the supplier must be required to have knowledge of accessibility.

3.1 Competence and organisation

Accessibility is one of the issues that the supplier and the customer need to tackle during the life cycle of the system. Problems may occur both at the general and the individual level and most suppliers and customers have come across desktop systems where adaptations for individual disabled end-users have been made. However the knowledge of and ability to deal with accessibility as a generally desirable characteristic of ICT systems is limited at present, both on the side of the supplier and the purchaser. Due to US legislation on accessibility, some US-based world-wide companies have nevertheless an organisation unit or staff assigned to accessibility issues, for example IBM, Microsoft, Sun and Apple. Consequently, European subsidiaries of these companies have access to expertise on accessibility.

Accessibility should become a profession in the ICT field, like other horizontal ICT areas such as security, ergonomics and environmental protection. It is essential that the procurer

- rewards those suppliers who have a record of achievements on accessibility,
- encourages suppliers without a record to put accessibility on their agenda, and
- attempts to assess the accessibility knowledge and capabilities of the potential suppliers.

These issues may appear both in the selection of tenderers, prior to the invitation to tender, and in the tendering process (the call-for-proposal and the in-depth evaluation of the received proposals).

3.2 Selection of tenderers

A public procurer may choose a restricted procurement procedure, under which only selected suppliers may submit tenders for a contract. The selection of suppliers may be based, *inter alia*, on their technical capacity, i.e. if they are adequately organised and skilled to perform the tasks to be contracted and if their track record is satisfactory.

The EC rules and corresponding national laws on public procurement stipulate the means which may be used for furnishing of evidence of technical capacity. The procurer shall specify, in the notice on intention to procure, which references he wishes to receive.

The procurer should include, in all notices on intention to procure, accessibility in the criteria for awarding.

For the procurement involving the selection of tenderers, i.e. procurements for a purchase sum exceeding the EU thresholds, the procurer may request the supplier to submit

- a statement detailing his practical experience in providing accessible products and/or services,
- a track record on achievements on accessibility for previous customers,
- evidence and experience of relevant staff training.

3.3 The tendering process

In procurements above and below the thresholds, the procurer may request the supplier to assess himself

using take-up of accessibility as a gauge, for example the following, based on a study of how usability methods are used by Swedish IT system development companies (Katzeff, Cecilia; Svärd, Per-Olof: Användbarhet i praktiken, en enkätstudie, SISU Publikation 95:20, November 1995):

1) The supplier has not come across accessibility issues and has no particular knowledge of accessibility issues.

2) The supplier is aware of the need for accessibility, but the issue is not on the agenda. The supplier has not found sufficient customer demand to establish a readiness for action. If an accessibility problem arises, it will be solved from scratch.

3) The supplier is aware of the accessibility issue at large and is to some extent prepared for action. The actions will, however, be taken on an *ad hoc* basis. The supplier may know of or have contact with accessibility expertise externally or upstream in the company.

4) The supplier has competence and an organisation unit at its disposal, either internally or externally. There is a commitment by the top management level to promote accessibility. One or more staff members may be assigned to monitor the field of accessibility and have basic knowledge of the field. Access to further expertise may exist upstream in the company, or the supplier may have an agreement with an external expert who can act as a subcontractor.

5) Accessibility is one of the activities of the supplier. A corporate policy on accessibility is established, enforced and well-known by the staff. A competent organisation unit is established in-house.

For alternatives 3, 4 and 5, the supplier should be required to provide evidence for his assessment by describing, where applicable, the approach taken, the

policy or commitment, the organisation, partners and external experts.

For procurements of systems where a significant number of end-users can be expected to be dependent on a high accessibility standard of the system, a supplier with an accessibility approach of level 3 should be a minimum requirement.

Outsourcing of an ICT-based activity to a third party supplier normally means that the responsibility for the accessibility of the system and the services provided by the system stays with the organisation, but the methods of how to provide accessibility is to be decided by the supplier. This requires that the supplier has an approach to accessibility corresponding to at least level 4.

3.4 Quality assurance systems

Many suppliers have adopted a quality assurance system. Some are certified according to a standard, e.g. ISO 9000. A quality assurance system is used to describe all the planning, preparation, work, checking and recording actions that are necessary to achieve the standard of product or service that the customer needs. These actions are largely common-sense and good business and management practice.

Software developers in particular are often required to have a quality assurance system, to ensure that the final product meets the specified requirements. A number of methods exist for quality management and quality assurance of the different phases of software development. Examples are:

- ISO/IEC9000-3:1997 Quality management and quality assurance standards - Part 3: Guidelines for the application of ISO9001:1994 to the design, development, supply, installation and maintenance of computer software.
- ISO/IEC TR 15504: 1998 Information Technology - Software Process Assessment, a standard which provides customers and suppliers with a single source for process definition and assessment.
- TickIT, a quality management system based on ISO9000-3. TickIT is the basis for certification of software producers, and is implemented in the UK, Sweden and Norway among other countries.
- SPICE, a project which resulted in a standard for software process evaluation and improvement, including a method for evaluating the capability of potential suppliers against contract requirements to identify risks associated with the supplier.

A quality system enables, in principle, a supplier to include accessibility considerations in his production process. The mere existence of a quality system does

not, however, ensure that the offered products really are accessible.

Suppliers who operate a successful quality management system should provide their customers with a greater assurance that they will perform as required. If all other factors are equal, a supplier who has an effective quality assurance system should be preferred to one who has not. Evidence of a satisfactory quality system is given by certification by an independent body.

3.5 Recommendations on supplier requirements

The ACCENT project recommends the procurers to include the following requirements as mandatory:

- The supplier shall assess himself with respect to the alternatives in Table 1 and provide the basis for his assessment by describing, where applicable, the approach taken, the policy or commitment, the organisation, partners and external experts.

The ACCENT project recommends the procurers to include the following requirements as desirable:

- The supplier should satisfy alternative 3 of Table 1 as a minimum, or, for procurements where the supplier is to be contracted on services comprising accessibility expertise, alternative 4 as a minimum.
- The supplier should have adopted a corporate policy which includes statements on usability and accessibility. These statements should be submitted. If the supplier has not adopted such a policy, he should outline his plans for elaborating such a policy.
- The supplier should have adopted a quality system complying to a standard, preferably ISO 9000.
- The supplier should give one or more references to sites where the product on offer is installed and where accessibility is considered to be an important feature.