



Remarks of

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

SECTION 508

FOSE 2000

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P R O C E E D I N G S

Mr. Howell: Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be starting in just a couple of minutes. If you don't have a seat and you would like one, there is an overflow room upstairs. If you simply exit out of the back door, take a right, there are a set of escalators on your immediate left and you can go upstairs. There is an overflow room up there that has a video feed of all that is going in here. We will be starting in just a couple of moments.

Ladies and gentlemen, if I can have your attention, please. My name is Bill Howell. I'm the general manager of the trade shows and producer of FOSE. It's my pleasure to welcome you here to FOSE and specifically to this keynote.

Today we have the honor of having Attorney General Reno speaking on Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1998. What I also want to let you know is that copies of the

executive summary of the Attorney General's Section 508 Report to the President are available at booth 1450 upstairs. That's the GSA booth upstairs.

So after this event you are certainly welcome to join us up on the trade show floor, find the GSA booth which is right in the center of the upstairs hall, and you can get copies of the summary of the Attorney General's Section 508 Report to the President.

Now I just ask you to please join me in welcoming Attorney General Reno.

Attorney General Janet Reno: Thank you very much. I want to thank the FOSE organizers for providing me the opportunity to be here today to address FOSE 2000.

Technology is changing the way we relate to each other and the rest of the world through the Internet, distance learning, telemedicine, e-commerce, and e-government. All of us are finding new, different, and often better ways to communicate and to share ideas and information, work, and knowledge, and this applies to each one of us. I'm learning an awful lot from the younger people in the office.

Technology has also enhanced the lives of people with disabilities. Blind people can use computers equipped with special software called screen readers. Screen readers say out loud the text that would normally appear on a computer monitor. People with quadriplegia can use voice recognition software. People who are deaf or hard of hearing can use text telephones. I have seen firsthand how technology can enable Department of Justice employees with disabilities to excel.

Sadly, though, the employment rate of people with disabilities has not kept pace with improvements in technology. Seventy-five percent of the 30 million adults with significant disabilities are underemployed or unemployed. These are people of working age who want to work. Many are bright, dedicated people with a very great deal to offer. This high unemployment rate of people with

significant disabilities is truly ironic as many high-tech jobs go unfilled. Many of these jobs may be ideal for people with disabilities. Everyone in this room can be part of the solution. All it takes is a change in perspective. Most technology was designed without thinking about barriers to people with disabilities.

Unless designers have disabilities themselves or know others who do, they may not realize how simple features would affect someone who, for instance, cannot use a computer mouse because she is blind or has limited manual dexterity.

Poorly designed technology can put up unnecessary barriers for people with disabilities just as poorly designed buildings keep some from entering. Some federal employees with disabilities have lost their jobs because changes in technology have made it impossible for them to continue doing what they once did very well. Unfortunately, citizens with disabilities don't have equal access to the wealth of information and opportunities federal agencies put on line or make available in information kiosks. For example, information that is provided in a visual form is inaccessible to people who cannot see until it is read by a screen reader. A screen reader cannot read graphical images unless words accompany those images. Web designers need to provide text labels for graphic images, which is a very simple thing to do. People who cannot use a computer mouse due to a vision or mobility impairment often have difficulty using software or navigating government websites. They need other ways to interact with their computer instead of just using a mouse.

Keyboard functions are important. Arrow and tab keys are also important. Multimedia audio information is inaccessible to people who cannot hear unless the information is also available in a visual format. Visual signals in captioning can make audio information accessible.

Automated telephone information services upon which many agencies rely may be difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to use. They may not be in the right

format for people who are deaf or hard of hearing who use text telephones, or they may require users to rapidly enter the correct telephone keypad numbers, something that may be difficult or impossible to do for someone with a mobility impairment.

Finally, printers, fax machines and 14 copiers may have liquid crystal display screens that are tilted for the convenience of the average height standing person, but someone who uses a wheelchair may not be able to read those displays. Over the past 15 years, many have realized that making technology accessible does not have to be expensive. It does not have to be difficult, and it is very much the right thing to do. But technology has changed so rapidly that accessibility has oftentimes been an afterthought, if a thought at all.

Modifying existing technology to be accessible is much, much more difficult, much more expensive than designing technology right in the first place. Accessible design is good design.

Government leaders such as the General Services Administration and the Department of Education have started working with industry. Leaders within the private sector emerged, too. For instance, the Web Accessibility Initiative is an international consortium of experts working to improve the accessibility of the Internet, and it has been instrumental in developing easy to use standards for web page design.

Recognizing that people with disabilities would continue to be an afterthought unless something was done, Congress wanted to provide incentives for the IT industry, so in 1998, President Clinton signed into law an amendment to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Section 508 provides opportunities to IT manufacturers and designers who market more accessible products to federal agencies. It does not directly regulate the private sector. Section 508 requires federal agencies to procure, develop, maintain, and use electronic and information technology that is accessible to people with disabilities unless it would be an undue burden to do so.

Built-in assistive technology is not required where it is not needed. For example, work stations of nondisabled employees are not required to be equipped with braille displays and printers. On the other hand, the networked computer systems, hardware and software that the government buys should be compatible with braille systems and printers so that if an employee needs them, he can use the same shared systems that other employees use. Section 508 does not require federal contractors to make their own Internet sites accessible to people with disabilities. But it does require the Internet sites of federal agencies to be accessible, even when they are designed and maintained by a private contractor. Accessible Internet sites don't have to be boring. They can be as attention getting, as interactive, as the designer's imagination allows, but again, accessible design is good design.

But what is accessibility? How is it measured? How expensive or difficult will it be to achieve? These are questions that will be answered in standards published by the Access Board, an independent federal agency.

The Access Board has just published for public comment proposed standards for accessible technology, software, websites, telecom, information kiosks, and office machines are included. These proposed standards are based on the unanimous recommendations of an advisory committee. The committee included representatives from industry, disabilities groups, educators, and nonprofit institutions all working together.

The ultimate goal of Section 508 is to make government's IT more accessible. Everyone needs to participate if we are to reach this goal. I encourage you to consider and to comment on the Access Board's proposed standards. I also encourage you, once the standards are final, to embrace them with the same creativity, energy, and dedication for which you are well-known. Everyone can be part of the solution. When it amended Section 508, Congress directed all agencies to evaluate their information technology to find out how accessible it is to people with disabilities, and report

the results to the Department of Justice. We were directed to report to the President the results of these self-evaluations. Today I am pleased to announce the department's first Section 508 Report to the President, Information Technology and People With Disabilities.

The report contains the results of comprehensive self-evaluations by 81 agencies and over agency components. The report is a starting point from which we can measure future progress. It helps to define the status quo and recommends some courses of action. The entire report is available on the usdoj.gov website.

We found that the biggest barrier was not in technology, but in opening lines of communication. These communication barriers must come down. Federal technology personnel, procurement officers, EEO staff, and people with disabilities should all begin talking to each other and working together. Everyone will benefit. But unless we talk together, we cannot move forward. There are no real surprises in the report. What we found is that most agencies have information technology that works very, very well for non-disabled persons, but can cause problems for people with disabilities.

The perspective of this community, this human resource, needs to be included. Agencies should check to see whether products are accessible to people with disabilities before they buy or lease them. In the past, most agencies waited until there was a request for an accommodation to see whether their systems could be modified to be accessible. The answer was often no. This is a bit like waiting until someone who uses a wheelchair needs to enter your building before you look to see if there are steps that would prevent him from entering. People with disabilities lose out and we all lose out. Our work is too important to leave anyone behind.

More up front attention can fix so many of the problems. The solutions are usually simple. The costs are usually minimal. Consider for instance a word processing program where printing a document requires users to point and click on a printer icon. Simply allowing users to choose between

using a mouse or hitting control p to print makes it possible for blind people and people with manual dexterity disabilities to print their documents. Likewise a copy machine can be made more accessible to someone who is blind if the manufacturer adds a raised nib on the F5 key. This allows blind people to orient themselves to the key pad more easily.

Some agencies stand out as leaders in the area of accessible technology, including the Department of Defense's Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program, the Social Security Administration's fully integrated assistive technology team, the Department of Education with its pioneering work, "Requirements for Accessible Software Design," and GSA's Center for IT Accommodations. In each of these agencies, procurement officers, technology experts, accommodations specialists, and people with disabilities work together to determine the agency's need. They communicate these needs to the technology industry, and industry responds with the innovation and speed that has become its hallmark. Everyone will benefit if we work together. We can start by learning from each other.

Many of the report's recommendations, I hope and believe will open lines of communication. For example, we recommend that GSA and the Access Board establish a federal information hotline, where agencies, people with disabilities, and the IT industry can seek answers to their Section 508 questions. Agencies should designate Section 508 coordinators. They should form voluntary committees of employees with disabilities and establish community partnerships with disability rights organizations. Agencies that have found creative solutions to accessibility challenges should share these with other agencies.

An agency should set up voluntary alternative dispute resolution mechanisms such as mediation, so people with disabilities don't have to go to court or work through time-consuming administrative processes to resolve accessibility issues. To assist federal procurement officers, government and industry should work together to develop an easy-to-understand way of informing procurement officials about accessible products. To make federal web pages more

accessible, agencies should test their web pages for accessibility before posting them. Agencies should also post e-mail addresses where people with disabilities can inform them of accessibility barriers on their web pages.

To make software used by federal agencies more accessible, accessibility manuals should be written for commonly used software so that federal employees with disabilities can make the most available accessibility features. To make federal agencies' telephone systems more accessible to people with disabilities, agencies that provide toll-free information services should make the same services available to people who use text telephones. The Federal Information Relay Service should add speech-to-speech and video relay interpreting to the services it provides. Agencies should staff general telephone lines with operators. These and other simple steps would help everyone.

People are counting on us. You all know how important this is. We can create a better work environment for the federal government. The unemployment rate among people with significant disabilities can be reduced. We can do a better job of delivering critical government services to everyone. Accessible products will start trickling into the private sector. Everyone will win if we can work together. I know that with all the innovative minds in this room, we can devise new and creative solutions.

Those who understand disability issues should learn about technology and all it has to offer. Technology experts should learn how people with disabilities use their products. Accessibility doesn't have to cost a lot. It doesn't have to be difficult. It is good design. Making this technological revolution work for everyone is what this is all about. And it will make an enormous difference in the lives of people with disabilities, now and for the future.

I invite each of you to apply the creativity, the intellect to make the federal government a place where barriers drop away, where you let people shine through for the talent they are, for the courage they have, for their abilities.



Each of you has a few pieces of the puzzle. Apart they are meaningless, but if we put them together, we will create a wonderful picture of inclusion, efficiency, and productivity. Shortly after I came to Washington, I met with representatives of industry who told me of their efforts to make America more accessible to people with disabilities. They told me that at first they thought regulations that faced them were terrifying, but then people came together and they talked to each other. And they developed solutions that in many instances were based on common sense.

Shortly thereafter, advocates in the disability community took me to Takoma Park in the suburb of Washington to see how one town had made a difference just by a box here, widening an aisle here, and what difference it had made to people with disabilities in that community. The human talent represented by people with disabilities, the creativity in each of these people, the determination, the grit, the courage, is something all of us would want to possess and we would all be proud to work with. We can do so much if we work together to open doors for so many Americans and to make the federal government a more effective, more productive employer, and then to make the world more accessible for all.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

Mr. Howell: Thank you very much. Thank you for joining us. I will remind you that copies of the executive summary of the Attorney General's Section 508 Report to the President are available at booth 1450, the GSA booth upstairs, and you are invited please to join us on the show floor. There are a number of pavilions that specifically address the issue of access technology.

Thank you again for joining us at FOSE. (End of session.)