

Section 508: How it is driving technology and employment of people with disabilities.

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November 14, 2004

In today's technology driven workforce, assistive technology is a vital tool in employment. Roadblocks exist when compatibility issues arise. One of the practical benefits of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act is forcing the issue of 'electronic curb cuts' or universal access to information technology (IT) suppliers thereby benefiting assistive technology users.

It is a little over five years since the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 passed. Section 508 is a part of the legislative response contained in this act. Still, many have questions about this piece of legislation and how it can affect employment.

Section 508 requires that the Federal Government purchase all of their electronic and information technology (E&IT) based on a clearly defined set of procurement guidelines designed to meet accessibility standards. In short, the Federal Government, arguably the worlds largest single purchaser of computers, software, websites, copiers, telephone systems, servers, and everything else defined as E&IT must consider accessibility before looking at price.

The passage of this act and the later modifications to the Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) provide government purchasing officials with templates that clearly spell out the 'buy accessible' concept within the Federal procurement system.

Section 508 has created a financial incentive for vendors wanting to supply E&IT to the Federal Government by building universal 'usability' into their product lines. Again, this is because Federal procuring officials are obliged BY LAW to accept a bid that meets Section 508 accessibility guidelines even if it is more expensive than a product that can fulfill basic business needs that does not meet the access standards.

The impact of these changes is still reverberating in the information technology industry today. Companies have responded by modifying equipment specifications to meet Section 508 guidelines and further publicly document their compliance by completing VPAT's – Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates. Go to any large IT providers'

website and you will see links to their product line with VPAT summaries. This quiet technology revolution is providing the Federal Government and by extension, the rest of the purchasing world (corporations, schools, and individuals) with E&IT that readily connects to the host of available assistive technologies that create the economic opportunity promised to each individual.

Section 508 information is available from a number of sources including www.section508.gov. This website reviews in detail the standards and exceptions that exist for Federal procurement.

As a National Rehabilitation Association member and a rehabilitation engineer, I have trained hundreds of Federal Procurement agents on implementing the FAR requirements. I have also worked with scores of IT companies on modifying product lines to meet these changing accessibility requirements. I see the continuing evolution of technology to include many consistent 'on ramps' for all of us as we work to support vocational rehabilitation efforts. I applaud the role that Federal Government has played in creating a business culture that recognizes the need for universal accessibility.

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