Specifications for a Web Accessibility Conformity Assessment Scheme and a Web Accessibility Quality Mark

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Foreword

This CWA was drawn up by a CEN/ISSS Workshop established to obtain a first level European agreement on a European conformity assessment scheme concerning the delivery of a “Quality Mark” for Web Accessibility, in accordance with the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

The decision to launch the CEN/ISSS Workshop was taken at the Kick-Off meeting on 14 April 2005 in Brussels.

This CEN Workshop Agreement was approved following the consensus of the Workshop’s registered participants at the final meeting in Brussels on 14-15 March 2006 and a subsequent expression of support through an electronic process that ended on 5 April 2006.

The CEN Workshop Agreement is based on the assumption that a Quality Mark for Web Accessibility will be beneficial to users including elderly people and users with disabilities. Many stakeholders support this assumption, as proven by the existence of many (national) labelling schemes already. It was noted that some major IT companies and their sector representative organisations clearly state a preference to use supplier’s declaration of conformity, which is more feasible and efficient according to their opinion. The Workshop therefore considered third party conformity assessment and supplier’s declaration of conformity equally.

The list of companies and organisations that have participated in the Workshop and expressed support to this CEN Workshop Agreement is available from the CEN Management Centre upon request.

W3C/WAI asked it to be recorded that they object to the implementation of this CEN Workshop Agreement until such time as high-quality, comprehensive, and consensed versions of the evaluation methodology and training requirements are available.

This CEN Workshop Agreement is publicly available as a reference document from the National Members of CEN: AENOR, AFNOR, ASRO, BSI, CSNI, CYS, DIN, DS, ELOT, EVS, IBN, IPQ, IST, LVS, LST, MSA, MSZT, NEN, NSAI, ON, PKN, SABASIS, SIST, SFS, SN, SNV, SUTN and UNI.
Introduction

A Convergence of needs

User and consumers organisations, industry and governments agree that the accessibility of technology is a significant and relevant issue that shall be addressed seriously and coherently.

Accordingly, in its Communication on eAccessibility, September 13th, 2005, the European Commission proposed a set of policy actions that should foster eAccessibility. It calls on Member States and stakeholders to support voluntary positive actions to make accessible ICT products and services far more widely available in Europe.

All see the accessibility of technology as a large-scale problem concerning many business domains and hitting a growing potential market. They consider that standards should help towards a society more beneficial to all citizens, matching the ethical objectives of modern democracies.

Also the work done by the W3C under the Web Accessibility Initiative is recognised as a possible basis for building up Web Accessibility, particularly the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Whatever basis is chosen, it must be globally harmonised.

Diversity of approaches

Based on this convergence, various demands have emerged from the stakeholders and concrete answers have been developed in several places for assessing the conformity of websites to the WCAG recommendations.

For instance, in several European countries, organisations working with disability groups have developed labelling schemes based on third party assessment, with some local success. In some cases they have been recognised by official governmental organisations. They also appear to have met expectations of Web site owners and small or medium sized Web agencies. In general these initiatives have been welcomed, also by public opinion, as a means to forge a path towards a more inclusive society. In several countries those organisations are exploring the possibility to adhere to certification schemes provided by international standards for certification or inspection. The approach of certifying accessibility by independent third party is supported by user and consumer organisations.

In parallel, the European Community has stated clear political objectives towards eInclusion. For instance, in its January 2003 Resolution on eAccessibility, the Council called for an “eAccessibility mark” for goods and services. The 2002 Ministerial Declaration on eInclusion reflected that “a European web accessibility label that certifies compliance with W3C/WAI guidelines could be considered in order to avoid market fragmentation”. In its recent communication on eAccessibility, the European Commission announces they will foster the use of three approaches not yet widely used in Europe: (i) accessibility requirements in public procurement, (ii) accessibility certification, and (iii) better use of existing legislation (referenced in section 4.3).

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1 World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)
EICTA (European Information & Communications Technology Industry Association), on behalf of European digital technology industry organisations, has published a White Paper on e-Accessibility\(^2\). The White Paper confirms their commitment to an inclusive information society and presents reasoned arguments in favour of the adoption of a supplier’s declaration of conformity, as used in most other areas of technology. It explains why EICTA does not support accessibility labelling, or an accessibility mark on products or services. Particularly, they argue that manufacturers will not achieve accessibility by a hurdle set at the end of a process, but by organisational commitment through the supplier’s declaration of conformity. EICTA indicate that supplier’s declaration of conformity has been agreed on an international level defined in ISO 17050 and shown to be a successful and effective way to demonstrate conformance with requirements in other areas including safety. They also express their concerns that sectoral, national or regional certification or labelling schemes and a lack of harmonisation of technical requirements would lead to market fragmentation, market delays and increased costs; all of which would be detrimental to making real progress with accessible products and services for the ultimate benefit of end-users. The White Paper has been endorsed or mirrored by other industrial ICT associations, such as ITI, BITKOM, and AeA. The approach of elaborating a form of supplier’s declaration is supported by some other stakeholders.

A compromise to find

The ambition of the CEN Workshop was to build up a first level European agreement on how standard conformity assessment schemes commonly used in Europe can apply to Web accessibility conformity assessment. This agreement shall reflect the three types of demands that were identified, namely supplier’s declaration of conformity, inspection and product certification. It also proposes a reasonable way for existing labelling schemes to improve and to harmonise.

For these reasons, the CEN Workshop Agreement offers different options so that organisations wanting to improve the credibility of their Web accessibility on a voluntary basis could find a scheme best fitting their needs.

These schemes aim at providing a general framework and a harmonised understanding for developing Web accessibility quality management systems, under the authority of a central European institute whose mission is to organise, harmonise and control practices in liaison with international bodies concerned. This institute should provide a good level of guarantee to customers and end-users, and objective, attainable and standard-based requirements for industry.

Important note

Currently there is no European standard (EN) for web accessibility. However, the W3C/WAI Web Content Accessibility Guidelines have been widely recognised and adopted at both the European Commission and EU member states level.

One essential assumption of the Workshop - based on the experience of the participants - is that assessing the conformity of a Web site to accessibility specifications is possible on an objective, reproducible and repeatable basis. This assessment shall be consistent with the latest adopted version of the W3C/WAI Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, in order to exclude the possibility of fragmentation.

Nevertheless, the assessment methods and techniques are not in the scope of this CEN WORKSHOP AGREEMENT, but are developed in a separate normative document.

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1 Scope

This document describes a scheme that provides a model for a harmonised web accessibility quality mark (from now on called “the web accessibility quality mark”).

The document is limited to the assessment of web accessibility and excludes other issues related to assessment or standardisation of electronic or internet products and services.

This document does not describe the criteria for assessing web accessibility, which will be elaborated in a separate normative document (from now on called “the normative document”). This document does not describe the methodology for their conformity assessment, which will also be elaborated in the normative document.

2 Abbreviations

CEN/ISSS European Committee for Standardisation (Comité européen de normalisation) / Information Society Standardisation System
CWA CEN Workshop Agreement
EA European Co-operation for Accreditation
EN European Standard (Europäische Norm)
EU European Union
IEC International Electrotechnical Commission
ISO International Organization for Standardization
Support-EAM Supporting the creation of an eAccessibility Mark
W3C/WAI World Wide Web Consortium, Web Accessibility Initiative
WCAG Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

3 Normative references

The following referenced documents are indispensable for the application of this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

Bestelformulier

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Normalisatie: de wereld op één lijn.