

4 February 2013

A new project: INCOBS mainstream technologies

A new project, INCOBS mainstream technologies, will investigate the accessibility of mainstream software and devices for blind and visually impaired users. Our particular focus will be on work place productivity. The project is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS). It will run for four years and is carried out by [DIAS GmbH](#)¹, with broad support from associations of blind and visually impaired people, public accessibility offices, training institutions, and assistive technology providers.

The name INCOBS mainstream technologies signals a change of emphasis compared to the assistive technologies focus of the 'old' INCOBS project. The new project will increasingly focus on technologies that are accessible 'out of the box', i.e., work without a need for dedicated assistive technologies. Smart phones, tablets, and navigation devices are becoming increasingly important - also in the everyday work context of blind and visually impaired users. Increasingly, devices have screen readers already integrated as part of their operating system - Apple's VoiceOver is the most prominent example. We will conduct product tests to establish to what extent mainstream devices are usable for blind and visually impaired people in their daily work. We intend to publish test results also in English.

■ Updated market surveys of devices and assistive technology

Traditionally, the INCOBS-Projekt focused on assistive technologies for blind and visually impaired people - e.g., screen readers or magnification software. The aim was to provide information that would help users, employers and accessibility offices select the most suitable solution for the work place. Within INCOBS mainstream technologies, we will also continue to report on new assistive technologies, contrasting their functionality to mainstream alternatives where these exist.

■ Moving from adaptation to general accessibility

Another focus of the new project are key software applications used at the work place. We will document to what extent these still require customisation of assistive technologies. In many cases, assistive technology like screen readers is still being customised by special service providers to ensure that the relevant software at the workplace can be used by blind and visually impaired people. The problem: customisations are expensive and take time. Often, they are not sustainable - a new version of the software will require further customisation. A better solution is to ensure that software is accessible from the start. INCOBS mainstream technologies will provide resources to facilitate informed choices by users, employers and accessibility offices.

■ The Customisation Finder

INCOBS mainstream technologies will develop and pilot a web-based application (the 'Customisation Finder' - German: 'Anpassungsfinder') that will aggregate information on software customisation cases. It will offer guidance as to what software is usable without customisation, and whether past customisation cases have been successful, effective and sustainable. By documenting actual occupational customisation cases, the Customisation Finder will create more transparency. It will support choices of accessible software and facilitate the re-use of customisation scripts that have been successfully deployed before.

■ Information and contact

The English version of the INCOBS mainstream technologies web site will soon be available at www.incobs.de/en. Follow the project on Twitter at @incobs to be kept up-to-date. If you have any questions, you can also contact the project manager, Detlev Fischer (Tel. ++49-40-431875-25, E-Mail: fischer@dias.de)²

INCOBS (2008 - 2011)

INCOBS is a German web portal for blind and visually impaired people (www.incobs.de) that provides information about assistive technologies and professional equipment at the workplace. The information is based on comparative market analyses and product tests comparing the usability, accessibility and functionalities offered.

Background

For the integration and vocational rehabilitation of blind and visually impaired people, the use of modern information and communication technologies is very important.

The quality of assistive technology and the accessibility of hard- and software together determine whether the blind and visually impaired can use computers and software, the Internet, mobile phones, or other technologies.

In the vocational context, fitting the workplace with the most suitable assistive technologies is indispensable for an efficient work environment and in turn, improve the professional options for people with visual impairments.

However, the employers, the employees concerned, and even experts generally know too little about this context. What is lacking is information about the specific opportunities for the blind and visually impaired at the workplace. Often, there is uncertainty which assistive device or software is most suitable for the tasks concerned; how competing products differ regarding their functionality or quality; and what criteria should govern the purchase of assistive technology at the workplace.

The aims of INCOBS

INCOBS supports the creation and fitting of computer-assisted work places for the blind and visually impaired. The provision of neutral and timely information about assistive technology improves the accessibility to modern information technology and makes its use more effective. INCOBS has the following aims:

Support the creation and continued maintenance of workplaces: For people with visual impairments to be able to meet the demands of their job, the workplace installation must be well chosen and customized to individual requirements. INCOBS supports users, employers and consultants in the choice of suitable assistive devices and workplace technologies.

Ensure participation in advanced technologies: INCOBS' aim is to point out the opportunities for integration offered by advanced technologies as they emerge. At the same time, it is important to highlight the drawbacks and potential new barriers to accessibility that these technologies bring about, both in order to improve their accessibility and to mitigate their negative effects.

Support accessibility: INCOBS offers information and support to developers of conventional information technology in order to improve the accessibility of their products.

The tasks of INCOBS



1. Market surveys of products and services

INCOBS provides market surveys for all important groups of assistive devices. The individual devices are compared against a range of suitable functional and quality criteria. This kind of baseline information creates market transparency, demonstrates the current state of technology, and greatly reduces the burden of time-consuming research and individual inquiries.

2. Tests of assistive devices and workplace technologies

INCOBS carries out comparative product tests of assistive devices and workplace technologies, such as video magnifiers, braille displays, screen readers or screen magnifying software. For each product group we develop suitable test instruments on the basis of user requirements and workplace profiles. The tests are then carried out with blind and visually impaired users. The results provide an easy-to-use overview of the relative performance and comparative strengths and weaknesses of the devices, and show suitable areas and cases of deployment.

In the evaluation of workplace technologies such as screens, laptops, mobile phones or voice recorders, the focus is on the accessibility and usability for people with visual impairments. On the whole, there are few products that could be considered fully accessible; our aim is instead to identify those products that offer the closest match to the requirements of the respective target group.

3. Evaluate the accessibility of software applications

Apart from the 'office standard' MS Office, many other applications are deployed in the workplace. A share of these applications can be rendered usable for blind and visually impaired users after a suitable customisation of the interface to screen readers and magnifying software. INCOBS carries out as-is analyses and provides information regarding the adaptability of applications as well as realistic case examples.

4. Instruct and inform

The web portal www.incobs.de is the centre piece of our information and public relations strategy. It offers all test results, market surveys, profiles of assistive devices, and checklists for product selection. In addition, the portal provides a list of relevant organisations and informs on advice and funding options with regard to assistive technologies. All information is provided free of charge. The information is targeted at different groups, such as end users, consultants, employers, and funding bodies. It meets the current criteria for accessible web sites.

INCOBS results are also disseminated through brochures and leaflets, contributions to print media as well as radio and television, and a presence at relevant trade fairs.

5. Seminars for facilitators and advisors

INCOBS offers seminars about the installation of workplaces for visually impaired people. The target audience are facilitators active in advising, training or employing people with disabilities. The seminars inform about the most important aspects of the technical and organisational framework required for the installation of workplaces.

INCOBS closely co-operates with self-help groups and organisations of the disabled to make sure that the relevant user requirements are properly addressed.

■ Interested in participating?

Today, most assistive devices and technologies are marketed internationally. To ensure the most effective dissemination of product information, a multilingual European portal similar to INCOBS would be sensible.

DIAS GmbH (www.dias.de), the company behind the INCOBS portal, is therefore looking for partners active in the area of accessibility and assistive technologies who would like to apply for a joint European-funded project with the aim to establish such a Europe-wide portal.

The exact shape of a EU project still needs to be defined. In establishing an information portal about assistive technologies on the European level, INCOBS can serve as a tried-and-tested model on the national level. This model will have to be significantly modified to be applicable on the European scale.

If you are interested in participating or would like further information, please contact:

DIAS GmbH, Project: INCOBS
Heike Clauss
Schulterblatt 36
20357 Hamburg, Germany
E-mail: clauss@dias.de³
Phone: +49 (0)40 43187515

■ Links

1. <http://www.dias.de>
2. <mailto:fischer@dias.de>
3. <mailto:clauss@dias.de>