



EATT

Equal Access to Technology Training

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The IT needs of people with vision impairments and the related needs of training service providers

# EATT PARTNERS

## **NCBI**

Whitworth Road  
Drumcondra  
Dublin 9  
Ireland  
Tel: +353 1 830 7033  
E-mail: [info@ncbi.ie](mailto:info@ncbi.ie)

## **RNIB Scotland**

Dunedin House  
25 Ravelston Terrace  
Edinburgh EH4 3TP  
UK  
Tel: +44 131 311 8500  
E-mail: [rnibscotland@rnib.org.uk](mailto:rnibscotland@rnib.org.uk)

## **Århus Amt**

### **Synscentralen**

Barthsgade 1  
DK-8200 Århus N  
Denmark  
Tel: +45 8739 2100  
E-mail: [syn@syn.aaa.dk](mailto:syn@syn.aaa.dk)

## **SIADV**

Institut Montclair  
51, rue du Vallon  
49000 Angers  
France  
Tel: +33 2 41 73 86 97  
E-mail: [glroux.siadv@montclair.fr](mailto:glroux.siadv@montclair.fr)

## **I.Ri.Fo.R.**

Via Borgognona, 38  
00184 Rome  
Italy  
Tel: +39 06 69881  
E-mail: [irifor@uiciechi.it](mailto:irifor@uiciechi.it)

## **SIADV**

CERADV  
La Villeneuve Ste Odile  
22640 Plénnée Jugon  
France  
Tel: +33 2 96 31 82 87

This project is part funded by the EU Leonardo Da Vinci programme



Education and Culture

**Leonardo da Vinci**

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First Edition 2003

## **Statement of the current situation**

The ability to use a computer is rapidly becoming the basic source of job security, employability, access to mainstream training, and social inclusion. It is only in the last decade that information technology has been taught as part of the mainstream curriculum at primary, secondary and, third level education. People with vision impairments, who left the education system prior to computers being taught on the mainstream curriculum, or who have a lower level of education, tend to be less familiar with IT. This group is also disadvantaged by the fact that they need additional assistive software to use a computer. Assistive software enables someone with a disability to use a piece of technology which might otherwise be inaccessible to them. Many older people with vision impairments are unaware of the benefits and opportunities created by assistive software. This effectively prevents people with vision impairment from access to inexpensive and widespread information and communication tools such as e-mail and the Internet.

## **Concerns and opportunities**

This research was conducted under the remit of the European project called "Equal Access to Technology Training" (EATT) (Leonardo Da Vinci Programme). All EATT project partners have noted that people with vision impairments aged over 35 years may be limited in their participation in social, cultural and economic life due to lack of access to IT training and lack of computer literacy. Current training opportunities do not cater

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well for this group. This may be due to lack of awareness of their particular needs, lack of awareness of the benefits to them, and practical barriers to inclusion in mainstream training opportunities. Acquiring IT skills is likely to lead to increased social inclusion, more access to training, better employment opportunities and better prospects for advancement in the workplace.

## **Aims of the research**

The overall aim of the EATT project is to increase computer literacy among people with vision impairments aged over 35 years. The research report of the EATT project assessed the degree of awareness of IT benefits and opportunities among people with vision impairments aged 35 and over and it identified the needs of this group in relation to accessing IT and achieving computer literacy. The EATT partners each presented an analysis of current thinking at Government level and local initiatives at a practical level, which have been designed to encourage older people with vision impairments into IT training. The research report examined the extent to which lack of computer literacy for this group leads to social exclusion due to lack of access to information, communication or consumer goods. It also attempted to reveal whether increased computer literacy skills among people with vision impairments would enhance access to mainstream training and employment and improve their chances of promotion. The report examined the needs and difficulties of this group in relation to obtaining computer literacy in mainstream courses

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and also identified the features that have made specialised IT courses successful. This study not only identified the needs of people with vision impairments in relation to IT Training, it also explored the level of awareness of the needs of people with vision impairments among IT training providers. The needs of IT training providers were also assessed in order to support them in encouraging and facilitating older people with vision impairments to participate in mainstream IT training courses.

## **Methodology and project partners**

The EATT partnership involves five organisations that work in the field of vision impairment. These partners are Syncentralen of Aarhus AMT in Denmark (AMT), SIADV in France, I.Ri.Fo.R in Italy, NCBI - National Council for the Blind of Ireland (Project Managers) and RNIB, the Royal National Institute of the Blind, United Kingdom. The EATT partners undertook a literature review and a questionnaire-based study of people with vision impairments over 35 years and IT trainers.

## **Research findings**

- People with vision impairments over the age of 35 years in this study appeared to have been aware of the impact of IT on employment and career advancement as well as being aware of IT as an alternative means of communication and access to information. This is apparent from their interest in introductory IT training, office software, and email.
- Limited access to local public transport or limited mobility were not found to be principle barriers to accessing training

centres. Training delivery methods, and the limited levels of accessibility in training materials used, created barriers to access for older people with vision impairments. Access to computers in the workplace and the family setting were found to be the two most important factors that raised awareness of the benefits of computer literacy and provided an opportunity of acquiring computer literacy skills for older people with vision impairments. Generally in this study it was found that most people with vision impairments over 35 years of age did not have the opportunity to improve their computer literacy skills within the formal educational system.

- For the most part, government policy on making Information Technology accessible to older people and people with disabilities has been progressive, incorporating principles of integration and mainstreaming. In many cases however, there is still a long way to go before such policies are fully implemented and their aims fully realised. Some of the more successful initiatives, which encourage older people into IT training, are those that are delivered at community level and are designed to meet the individual needs of older and vision impaired learners. Some of the more successful courses which targeted people with vision impairments adapted their contents and training methods to the needs of the participants. However, it was also necessary to consider the level of education of the target group. Trainers should provide a supportive teaching environment and should be aware of the needs of the participant by providing the

appropriate methods of instruction. Personal development skills as well as technical skills are often of equal importance.

- Computer literacy was found to improve access to employment, job retention and opportunities for promotion. There is no direct evidence that lack of computer literacy makes it more difficult to be included in mainstream education, although it would be very difficult to gather enough data to answer this question. It was found that lack of computer literacy does not, for the present, necessarily lead to social exclusion due to lack of access to information, communication or consumer goods. Traditional methods of sourcing information, communicating and purchasing are still commonly used by older people with vision impairments and continue to provide an adequately accessible means. This may also be due to the lack of awareness of the potential of IT amongst this group. People with vision impairments would benefit from having the option of using the additional means provided by computers.
  
- The success of specialised IT training initiatives can be attributed to their holistic approach, tailored to meet the individual needs of trainees and incorporating personal development skills as well as technical skills. Training is provided in a supportive environment, sensitive to the personal and financial demands placed on its trainees. Trainers are aware of the needs of people with vision impairments and are familiar with the assistive software

options available. These features can be appended to mainstream IT training courses.

- In general, mainstream IT training providers are quite open to providing IT training to people with vision impairments and they realise that certain adaptations to materials, equipment and training approach must be met. There is a need to raise the awareness of training providers of the potential opportunities provided to people with vision impairments by computers and the Internet. Mainstream IT training providers were also unaware of the assistive software options available to people with vision impairments. Training providers need appropriate equipment, adapted facilities, support and assistance before and during training.