BARRIEREFREI (AUSTRIA)

Access to ICT Opens Opportunities to Those With Disabilities

Overview of the Project

Initiated by the University of Linz and Microsoft Austria, the ECDL Barrierefrei (without barriers) project helped people with disabilities to become digitally literate through ICT training and certification.

Through this training and certification, the project enabled people with disabilities to enter the labour market. Based on successful e-learning material, all seven ECDL modules[1] in the project were available as an interactive learning platform which met the needs of people with disabilities. The structure of the project followed a holistic approach to cover all special requirements of people with disabilities or marginalised groups, rather than just focusing on one narrow target group.

The ECDL Barrierefrei project focused on the following groups of people:

- Blind and visually impaired people
- Deaf people and people with a hearing impairment
- Cognitively impaired people
- Physically handicapped people
- Migrants and other people with language problems
- Elderly people

Project Background

The European Union Leonardo da Vinci programme, which conducted research on ICT training and the needs of people with disabilities, was the starting point of the ECDL Barrierefrei project. In 2003, the University of Linz and Microsoft Austria started a project on developing e-learning for people with disabilities by using ECDL training and testing. Bit Media, a company that provides e-learning solutions, developed the content, and the University of Linz provided the required expertise for the adoption of the given platform and content.

In 2005, the first four ECDL modules of the Barrierefrei project were presented to the general public by the Federal Minister for Education, Ms. Elisabeth Gehrer. In 2006, a version of all seven ECDL modules was launched on DVD and a year later as an online platform. The Austrian Computer Society then ran workshops for ECDL trainers in order to provide qualified ECDL training for people with disabilities.

Aims

The main aim of the Barrierefrei project was to enable people with disabilities and members of marginalised groups to enrol for ECDL training and testing, thus helping them to raise their potential on the labour market and unlock the multiple benefits provided by ICT access.

[1] For a detailed explanation of the ECDL certification programme, visit: www.ecdl.org

Project Partners and Funding

As the main partners in the ECDL Barrierefrei project:

- The Austrian Computer Society (OCG) managed the ECDL programme and provided the test centres with the required information on the ECDL Barrierefrei project.
- Microsoft Austria (Microsoft Österreich) was the main sponsor of the project. It provided funding and helped to promote the project through various public relations activities.
- The Ministry for Education, Art and Culture (Bundesministerium für Unterricht, Kunst und Kultur) endorsed the project and provided financial assistance.
- Johannes Kepler University Linz provided the needed expertise to meet the requirements of people with disabilities.
- Bit Media provided the e-learning platform and solutions for the ECDL Barrierefrei training.
- IT in der Bildung GmbH and Österreichische Nationalbank were also sponsors of the project.

Delivery Details

ECDL training and testing were provided by ECDL Accredited Test Centres that offered the ECDL programme for people with disabilities. The Austrian Computer Society delivered all the necessary information and tools to the test centres in order to enable the people with disabilities to enrol on the ECDL programme.

People with disabilities were provided with the same ECDL tests as any other ECDL candidate. Moreover, the candidates enrolled in the project were not given any extra time during the ECDL test. They were allowed to use some assistive technologies and equipment, for example, deaf and cognitively impaired people were allowed to use very simple language with short sentences and simplified structure, deaf and visually impaired people can use Braille display and screen reader, special keyboard etc. This rigorous application of ECDL standards had two distinct benefits: candidates with disabilities feel that they are being assessed at exactly the same level as all other candidates, and prospective employers can see that the internationally recognised certification has not been diluted in any way.

Success and Impact

ECDL certification has proven to be one of the basic tools for raising the education levels of people with disabilities. Through various promotional activities, Austrians have been well informed about ECDL certification and are aware of its benefits. Better ICT skills improve individuals' communication abilities, provide access to information, and raise the quality of people's private and professional lives. As a result, hundreds of candidates enrolled on the ECDL programme through the Barrierefrei project and have experienced the benefits of enhanced ICT skills.

Awards and Public Recognition

- Award 'Multimedia Staatspreis' by the Federal Ministry of Economics and Labour in Vienna
- Best Practice Project 'Microsoft EMEA' in Munich
- Award for Outstanding Contribution by Microsoft in Redmond, West Virginia, USA
- Invitation to EU Ministerial Conference in Riga
- Invitation to the UNO Global Conference on Youth and ICT in Geneva

Testimonials

"Independent training platforms, such as the ECDL Barrierefrei project, offer substantial support especially for people with disabilities. The Austrian Ministry of Education, Art and Culture has a natural desire to ensure access to education for those people, which results in equal employment opportunities."
Dr. Claudia Schmidt, Austrian Minister for Education, Art and Culture

"Our initial idea was to support people with disabilities in helping them to access the Information Society...today we offer educational materials and training and help people with disabilities to overcome their disabilities and become engaged in various educational programmes. The ECDL Barrierefrei project helps people with disabilities to gain better job opportunities."
Jan Muehlfeit, Chairman, Microsoft Europe

"The ECDL Barrierfrei project's rollout is in process, the Austrian Computer Society spreads the information about the successful project results among its test centres, organisations that represent people with disabilities, and media. The Barrierefrei project's goal in Austria is to fully integrate people with disabilities in the ECDL training and certification process which has positive effects also on the ECDL recognition and transparency for all other candidates in the country."
Professor Erich Schmidt, the ECDL trainer, blind since birth, a teacher for over 30 years