

Submission to  
LegCo Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

14 May 2001

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**Introduction**

1. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) submitted a paper to this Panel on 12 March 2001. The paper outlined the benefits and barriers of Information Technology (IT) for people with disabilities (PWDs). In the paper, we recommended actions to be taken to narrow the digital divide and we reiterate their relevance to the issues discussed today.
2. IT is an effective tool to achieve economic, social and cultural development. It empowers disadvantaged groups through access to knowledge. For this submission, we recommend that the Government should develop strategies to achieve **full digital inclusion** in Hong Kong. Such strategies should tackle the root causes of digital divide including the socio-economic factor and technical aspect.

**Socio-economic status and digital divide**

3. A recent report on digital divide in US observed that socio-economic disadvantages, i.e. lower education levels and incomes, are reasons for lower Internet access<sup>1</sup>. The Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) statistics reflects similar situation in Hong Kong. For instance, the penetration rates of personal computer and Internet usage are higher for high-income households; usages of personal computer and Internet service are more common among those with tertiary educational attainment<sup>2</sup>, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Smolenski, M. (2000) *The Digital Divide and American Society: A Report on the Digital Divide and its Social And Economic Implication for our Nation and its Citizens*. USA: Gartner.

<sup>2</sup> Census and Statistics Department. (November 2000) *Thematic Household Survey Report No. 2 – Information Technology Usage and Penetration*.

4. Women and PWDs are most likely to be disadvantaged in accessing IT due to their socio-economic status. Thus, any Government strategies in IT development should seek to target these groups so that they are not marginalized in the development of a digital society. In the recent released Digital 21 Strategy 2001, to strengthen the Hong Kong Community for digital exploitation is identified as one of the key result areas. We welcome the initiative and look forward to seeing its benefit to the disadvantaged groups.

#### **Technical accessibility and digital divide**

5. Technical designs of IT products, both hardware and software, affect PWDs in joining the digital world. The Government, as service provider and regulator, should formulate IT policies that ensure IT products and service provision are technically accessible by PWDs.

6. Specifically, we would like to highlight following areas for which actions should be taken to ensure full digital inclusion.

#### *Statistical information*

7. Statistical information is necessary for assessing the needs and service shortfall in the process of formulating policies for the disadvantaged groups. We suggest that the Government collect information and statistical data specifically on the present situation of how women and PWDs accessing IT. The survey conducted by C&SD should be expanded to cater for this purpose.

#### *Government Budgeting*

8. IT development was stated as a priority area in the 2001/02 Annual Budget. However, there is no detail information showing how resources are designated to facilitate the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in IT developments.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the budget for “IT in the Community” for the financial year of 2001-02 is decreased by 7.7% from \$31 million to \$28.6 million compared with the previous financial year but there is no information to show how other resources are pulled together to enable community’s participation.

9. When budgeting for IT tasks, it is necessary that the implications for PWDs and women – how they will be affected or benefited – should be examined.

*Access to personal computer (PC) and Internet*

10. Public policy in IT should aim at bringing access of PC and Internet to people in home, at school, at work and in the community. In the 2000 Policy Address, the Government was committed to give \$200 million to secondary schools to buy notebook computers for loaning to students who would otherwise be deprived of the development opportunity for lack of financial means.
11. The Government has set up Cyberpoints at a few centers and schools for PWDs easy access. This initiative to bring access of IT in the community should be extended to cover women centers and more centers accessible for PWDs as well.
12. To ensure technical accessibility of IT products for PWDs, measures should be taken to encourage research and development of new and affordable assistive technology. At the same time, standards should be set to ensure websites are designed to be universally accessible.
13. Support network should be made available and easily accessible for both PWDs and women who would require training and advice in using IT. In this regard, we suggest that the Government establish an IT resource center or information network to provide assistance and advice to PWDs in using assistive technology, and to those who require other forms of assistance such as technical and/or software applications problems, etc.

*E-business and E-government*

14. The Government has stated its commitment to creating a favourable environment for e-business in Hong Kong. Logically, it needs to ensure that all sectors can participate and be benefited from its initiatives.

15. Online purchasing is becoming more popular in e-business. Online sale of Government publications via the Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) is to be launched within 2001. Those e-transactions generally require payments to be settled electronically, usually via credit card accounts. The Government needs to consider how to facilitate the low-incomes or dependents (for example, homemakers, most of whom are women) in this process by having choices of other means of payment.
16. In the process of procuring IT facilities and services<sup>4</sup>, the Government should ensure that acquired are accessible to PWDs. The Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) Scheme is implemented to deliver public services to the community via digital means. However, since its operation in December 2000, it is still inaccessible to PWDs in many ways as already stated by many disability groups. This is a typical example where the needs of disadvantaged groups has not been adequately mainstreamed in the project development.

*Attitude and awareness training*

17. A key element to full digital inclusion is to cultivate a positive attitude towards IT development and an awareness of its importance. According to the aforesaid C&SD survey, people in Hong Kong were generally aware of the significant role of IT in daily life and economic development. However, the survey did not provide much information on the readiness of people to embark on any IT training plan and if so, whether they have the resources (including financial resources, times and human support etc.) to do so.
18. School education is crucial stage in teaching the next generation's IT skills and knowledge. For the moment, girls are still under-represented in IT and science related subjects. The Government needs to conduct qualitative studies to understand how gender role affects girls' and boys in pursuing IT studies so as to identify strategies to remove barriers. As for PWDs, it is necessary that there are adequate IT expertises at schools to support their learning of and with IT.

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<sup>4</sup> As stated in the Digital 21 Strategy 2001, since 1998 the Government have adopted an active

19. We understand that the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has worked with other government departments and NGOs on providing IT awareness programmes for the elderly and PWDs.<sup>5</sup> According to the SWD, there were 2,600 PWDs involved in the IT Hong Kong Campaign earlier this year. It is estimated that 5,000 elderly will be provided with IT awareness training in 2001-02. The number is small comparing with the relevant population size.
20. More important, there does not appear to have any specific plan for similar training programs for women. For women who have missed basic education, or have been forced to stay back as homemakers, IT training programs is particularly important to help them re-enter the workforce. Tailor-made training programs and support services are required to suit their needs and fit into their home-keeping schedule.

#### **Partnership with users, private sector and NGOs**

21. The realization of full digital inclusion in Hong Kong depends largely on Government's policy and strategies. The Government needs to have partnership with users, the private sector and the NGOs in launching its initiatives. Private sector plays a major role in products (both hardware and software) design and development, and NGOs play an important role in training and raising awareness of IT by outreaching to the target groups. The Government needs to consider how to facilitate and, at the same time, enlist all stakeholders in the process of digital inclusion in Hong Kong.

#### **Equal Opportunities Commission May 2001**

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outsourcing strategy for the provision of IT services within the Government and it will continue to outsource two-third of new Government IT projects each year.

<sup>5</sup> Social Welfare Department's discussion paper dated 12 February 2001 to LegCo Panel on Welfare Service titled "*Information Technology in the Social Welfare Sector*".