Access Board Proposes Updated Requirements

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Sachin Pavithran, vice-chair of the U.S. Access Board and director of the Utah Assistive Technology Program at the CPD

The U.S. Access Board has released for public comment a proposed rule updating accessibility requirements for information and communication technology (ICT) in the federal sector covered by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. The rule also would jointly update guidelines for telecommunications equipment subject to Section 255 of the Communications Act.

“The Board's proposal is responsive to widespread changes and innovations in the IT and communication industries,” said Sachin Pavithran, Vice Chair of the Access Board and director of the Utah Assistive Technology Program at Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities. “It is important that the 508 Standards and 255 Guidelines stay abreast of the ever-evolving technologies they cover so that accessibility for people with disabilities is properly addressed.”

The proposed rule updates various requirements to address fundamental shifts and trends in the market, such as the convergence of technologies and the increasingly multi-functional capabilities of products like smart phones. Another key goal of this update is to promote consistency with other requirements in the U.S. and abroad in order to improve accessibility and to facilitate compliance. A leading reference, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), is incorporated into the rule and applied to web-based content as well as to offline documents and software. The Board is proposing other revisions that will harmonize the rule with voluntary consensus standards, including those issued by other countries and international bodies such as the European Commission due to the global nature of the ICT market.

The proposed rule specifies the technologies covered and contains performance-based criteria as well as technical requirements for hardware, software, and support documentation and services. Access is addressed for all types of disabilities, including those pertaining to vision, hearing, color perception, speech, manual dexterity, reach, and strength. The proposed rule is based on recommendations from the Board's Telecommunications and Electronic and Information Technology Advisory Committee (TEITAC) which comprised a broad cross-section of stakeholders representing industry, disability groups, government agencies, and other countries. It also incorporates public feedback the Board received through the release of two advance drafts of the rule.

“The significant input the Board has received from stakeholders and interested parties throughout this process is reflected in the proposed rule,” notes Pavithran. “Such collective feedback is critical to getting things right in the final rule, and it is no different with the current proposal, which includes a host of questions the Board is posing to the public to gather additional information on various topics.”

Public comments on the rule, as well as on a preliminary assessment of its estimated costs and benefits, are due in 90 days. The Board also will hold public hearings on the rule in San Diego on March 5 and in Washington, DC on March 11. In addition, the Board will conduct a public webinar to review the proposal on March 31.

This post first appeared on the U.S. Access Board's web site.

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