IBM Contributes Open Source Code to Make FireFox Browser More Accessible

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IBM announced that it is contributing software to the Mozilla Foundation's Firefox Web browser to make it easier for more users -- including those with visual and motor impairments -- to access and navigate the Web.

In addition to contributing code that will make it possible for Web pages to be automatically narrated or magnified, and to be better navigated with keystrokes rather than mouse clicks, IBM is contributing Dynamic Hypertext Markup Language (DHTML) accessibility technology to the upcoming Firefox Version 1.5. This will allow software developers to

build accessible and navigable "Rich Internet Applications" (RIAs) -- a new class of applications that are particularly visual and interactive. DHTML will also allow users to efficiently navigate content more easily using keystrokes rather than a mouse.

This is being done in support of ongoing work at the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative, and as part of IBM's commitment to open standards and open source.

This software will make Firefox 1.5, running on Windows, the only browser to give developers the ability to add accessibility functions to RIAs that will make them more "accessible" to the disabled or elderly. As interactive, responsive, intuitive and feature-laden as programs installed on a PC desktop, RIAs can run without requiring users to install additional programs on their PCs. However, the features that make graphical applications so popular are difficult for many users with disabilities to use.

With the new accessibility features in Firefox 1.5, all users can more easily navigate Web-based applications via the keyboard. With the adoption of DHTML accessibility code, Web developers can create pages that reduce, for example, the amount of tabbing required to navigate a document, such as spreadsheets and tabbed sections, to help minimize keystrokes for users with mobility disabilities.

IBM and Mozilla's work is an important step in helping to make the increasingly popular browser acceptable for adoption by governments. As an example, Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act requires that federal agencies' electronic and information technology be accessible to all employees and citizens regardless of their abilities.

The advances in Firefox 1.5 will also enable Internet companies, such as Yahoo!, to respond quickly to the marketplace and to reach new

customers.

"The Accessible DHTML Technology offers great advantages to disabled users and we will continue to leverage the technology to provide visually-pleasing and content-rich web browsing experiences to users," said Victor Tsaran, Accessibility project manager, Yahoo!. "Having such a powerful technology at our disposal will enable Yahoo! to make more of its services accessible to people with disabilities worldwide."

IBM has built the key pieces of accessibility into Firefox, including support for Microsoft Active Accessibility, Microsoft's accessibility API standard for Windows. This allows Firefox to work with screen readers such as GW Micro's Window-Eyes and Freedom Scientific's JAWS. Screen readers are software programs that read software and content aloud and provide Braille access.

"IBM's commitment to further Firefox's capabilities and reach people who have disabilities marks an important technical advancement for Firefox. On a larger scale it is necessary to make the Web and all of its content accessible to everyone," said Mitchell Baker, president of the Mozilla Corporation.

The contribution of accessibility code to Firefox is the latest development in IBM's 76-year history of supporting employees and customers with disabilities through easy-to-use software, hardware and consulting services.

The market for accessible information technology is large and growing. Between 750 million and 1 billion of the world's 6 billion people have a speech, vision, mobility, hearing or cognitive disability, according to the World Health Organization.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, one quarter of the U.S. population

will reach 55 by 2008, and about two-thirds will experience a disability after age 65. (In other developed countries, including Italy, Spain and Japan, 45 percent of the population will be over the age of 60 by the year 2040.) With American workers staying on the job far beyond the traditional retirement age of 65, more employees can make use of accessible information technology, including the Firefox browser.

And, according to research by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in Washington, D.C., seniors, who are more likely to have a visual or motor disability, have been the fastest-growing group to go online in the last few years. In 2000, only 15 percent of seniors went online. By 2004, it was 22 percent.