

ability

Assistive technology at work

Issue 81 Spring 2011

Literacy support software

- *Ability* founder talks about his life in technology
- Programs that help you take a break
- Speech technology finds a voice
- Making mobiles more usable

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Most recently, Vangent managed the Home Access Learner Evaluation and Management Service. The outcome: the provision of personalised assistive technology solutions to over 9,300 profoundly disabled children from disadvantaged families, making a meaningful difference to the lives of a worthy cohort. This success required agile delivery, secure information handling, integrated case management and last but by no means least, a reliance on trusted, and professional disability assessors.

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End of the grumbling world

Campaigners need to exploit new media for disability rights, argues Kevin Carey



As *Ability* approaches its 20th anniversary, John Lamb looks at how assistive technology has changed since 1991

Back to the future

Nearly 20 years ago *Ability* first came off the presses, put together by a band of volunteers led by Geoff Busby, chair of the British Computer Society Disabled Specialist Group, and editor Tom Mangan.

The magazine was born out of the idea that if only more people were aware of the possibilities of assistive technology then it might be more readily available to those who needed it most. It's a continuing theme as the news item on p7 about the Cardiac report on technology transfer makes clear.

The report chronicles the difficulties in getting assistive technology out of the laboratory and into the hands of disabled people and the shortcomings of mainstream developers when it comes to making their products accessible.

Early issues of *Ability* have a familiar ring: they chart efforts to apply technology to helping people with dyslexia, report on government programmes to promote accessible IT and record the growing involvement of the magazine's writers in international movements to promote assistive technology.

However, there was a Heath Robinson approach back then. The charismatic Geoff Busby, who we interview on p10, used various home made adaptations – one involving string – to operate his keyboards. In fact it was his desire to avoid string-driven technology that led him to found the BCS Specialist Group in the first place.

A feature such as our cover article on literacy support software on p13 would have been unthinkable in 1991: there were just not enough products around to warrant a comparative survey.

Similarly, social media and the widespread use of the internet were a gleam in a technologist's eye when *Ability* started. Both innovations at first excluded disabled users and then scrambled to include them, which is a continuing story.

Not only has the assistive technology industry become more professional – it even has a trade association now – but mainstream IT firms are all much more committed to accessibility than they were before.

All the major companies have development teams working on assistive features, but in other respects the assistive technology business is unchanged. It is a cottage industry, short of funds but run by extremely committed people.

Many of those who buy and run IT systems are much more receptive to the idea they should include everyone. It would have been unthinkable in the early 1990s for ginger groups such as the Business Taskforce on Accessible Technology or the OneVoice coalition to exist.

Geoff Busby and his magazine were influential voices in bringing many of these changes about. And the publication he founded is still trying to follow in his footsteps. ■

Chair of audit firm quits over conflict of interest

The charity that audits the assessments and technology that disabled students receive is under fire following the sudden resignation of its chair.

Dr Gregory Burke, head of the online information service DisabledGo, resigned over a conflict of interest days after taking up his post as chair of the Disabled Students Allowance Quality Assurance Group (DSA QAG) at the beginning of March.

After the resignation, technology suppliers and assessment centres, who pay up to £20,000 to be recognised by DSA QAG under the DSA, have complained about the service it provides.

Complaints include low standards, delayed audits and conflicts of

interest on the board.

The job of the DSA QAG is to check that assessment centres and suppliers are delivering a good service to students. Student Finance England, the body that administers the DSA, only deals with firms recognised by DSA QAG.

"Many of you will be aware that this has been a difficult time for QAG and its staff, and some members are dissatisfied with QAG having raised a number of issues with the organisation," acknowledged DSA QAG chief executive Karen Docherty in a letter to disability support professionals.

However, there are increasing demands for reform of the DSA QAG, which is said to have increased its income by 30% and to have



Jeremy Fox: "need for improvement"

£373,000 in its bank account at the end of last financial year.

"If, as a sector, we are concerned about improving and maintaining a high quality of provision for our students, then there can be absolutely no justification for using an organisation whose own standards are so lamentably low and that adheres to no recognised standards of its own," said Jeremy Fox, managing director of Claro Learning. ■

www.dsa-qag.org.uk

Grants website aims to be student friendly

Student Finance England is battling to make improvements to the accessibility of the website and online forms students use to apply for the Disabled Student Allowance.

By 2015 all students must apply for financial help via the DirectGov site; however the colours and layout of the screens and forms they must use online make them difficult to read. Students who want to apply

for the Disabled Students Allowance must visit five pages and scroll three quarters of the way down them.

"One of the biggest issues is the DirectGov website. I do know it's not friendly to students," said Michelle Wickenden, diversity manager of Student Finance England.

Meanwhile, the numbers of students applying for DSA funding has risen 40% to an estimated

35,000 over the last financial year, Wickenden told delegates to a conference organised by Claro Learning.

Part time students will get better grants next year. And applications from disabled students will be processed more quickly thanks to extra staff and changes to administrative procedures. ■

www.clarolearning.com

Funds should go to students

Funds to support disabled students should be given to them rather than handed to universities and colleges, says a leading education expert.

"The beauty of the DSA is that the money goes to the student," Professor Alan Hurst, a trustee of Skill, the national bureau for students with disabilities, told an audience at a

recent Claro Learning conference.

"Given the focus on tuition fees there will be a review of DSA. My fear is that the money will go to the institution rather than students."

If that happened there would be no guarantee the money would be spent on students, Hurst warned.

The former head of the

department of education at Central Lancaster University argued that universal design of courses and study programmes were the most effective way of making sure that disabled students were included.

Professor Hurst, who has recently published a book called *Staff Development: a Practical Guide*, called for better staff training to remove the barriers students face. ■

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Pitfalls of assistive technology transfer

Lack of awareness of the needs of disabled people, risk averse development policies and poor product specification are among barriers to the spread of knowledge about assistive technology in Europe.

This is the message from a report called *Passing it On: Technology Transfer for Assistive and Accessible Information and Communications Systems* carried out by Dr John Gill for an EU project called Cardiac.

The report points out that technology transfer, the process of getting knowledge out of the laboratory, is different for assistive technologies compared with

mainstream ones intended to be usable by people with disabilities.

Most assistive technologies have failed to make it out of the laboratory to become products available at affordable prices, says the report.

Designers of mainstream products consider accessibility issues too late in the design process, while many companies put short-term profitability ahead of the need to improve usability and accessibility of their products.

The report makes a number of recommendations for improving technology transfer including the setting up of broker agencies



Dr John Gill, the report's author

to provide advice and public procurement policies that encourage the development of assistive and accessible products. ■

www.cardiac-eu.org/tech_transfer/report.pdf

Obama's special advisor lays it on the line

President Obama's new special advisor on disability was among top level policymakers who laid out a tougher official line on disability at the CSUN conference recently.

Kareem Dale, the highest ranking advisor on disability in the US, outlined the President's plans for boosting the life chances of disabled people.

"It's a pretty big deal to have the president's representative at CSUN," conference director Sandy Plotin told *Ability*. "It shows they are walking the walk."

Among recent initiatives under discussion at the annual technology fest put on by California State University, Northridge in San Diego, was executive order 135458.

The order directs government agencies to increase the proportion of disabled people in government jobs. Officials explained their efforts to increase recruitment.

The conference featured open, 'listening' sessions design to help officials gather the views of delegates. There was a session on changes to Section 508, the law that

requires federal agencies to provide accessible equipment for workers.

The Federal Communications Commission held a hearing on its 21st Century Communications & Video Accessibility Act of 2010.

The Act calls for captions for television programmes shown online; requires better access to the closed captioning function and requires internet-based phone services to be hearing aid compatible.

Video description for the visually impaired is also a requirement. ■

<http://csunconference.org>

BRIEFS

RNIB's ultrasound iGlasses

RNIB has designed a pair of spectacles called iGlasses that detect obstacles using ultrasound and provide varying vibration feedback as a wearer approaches them. Developed in conjunction with AmbuTech, the battery powered iGlasses are intended to detect objects at neck and chest height. RNIB says iGlasses are a secondary

aid to be used alongside a cane or a dog. They can detect objects up to three meters away and cost £79.99 plus VAT.

www.rnib.org.uk

Remote learning course

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has commissioned a remote learning course to train web designers about on-screen accessibility following successful pilot projects at Lloyds Bank and in the

travel industry. Experts at the charity AbilityNet and the British Computer Society will develop the product.

www.equalityhumanrights.com

Skill closes its doors

Skill, the national bureau for students with disabilities, has closed due to money difficulties. Recent efforts to turn around the charity's finances failed to save the organisation. Skill's resources are still available.

www.skill.org.uk

Technology4Good awards celebrate inclusion

E-accessibility charity AbilityNet has launched a national awards scheme that recognises organisations and individuals who actively promote digital inclusion in the community.

TV presenter, Mariella Frostrup (pictured) and Digital Champion, Martha Lane Fox, are backing the Awards, which are sponsored by BT.



Technology4Good is intended to celebrate the diverse ways in which charities, businesses, schools, government and the public have harnessed the power of technology to bring positive social benefits for others.

Nominations are invited in eight categories up to the May 9 deadline on the www.Technology4Goodawards.org.uk website.

The UK Technology4Good Awards offer nominees the

opportunity to show their expertise in a range of areas including: accessibility, volunteering, innovation, fundraising, creating partnerships, community action and meeting the needs of disabled customers.

With additional support from Barclaycard, Charity Technology Trust, IT4Comunities, Microsoft, RaceOnline2012 and UK online centres, the UK Technology4Good Awards is an opportunity for outstanding and inspirational achievements in digital inclusion to obtain national recognition for the first time.

Says AbilityNet chief executive Nigel Lewis: "As the leading experts in e-accessibility for people with disabilities, we are acutely aware of the influence of digital technology.

"Whether at home, at work or in education, full access to computers and the internet can be life changing – economically, socially and psychologically. We are delighted that BT has enabled us to make this awards scheme a reality.

"We are thrilled to welcome Martha Lane Fox to our panel of judges and equally honoured that Mariella Frostrup has accepted our invitation to compère the Awards." ■

www.Technology4Goodawards.org.uk

Organisation offered the MiDRAS touch

Research by the Health & Safety Executive shows that disabled employees are as productive as their colleagues, stay longer in their jobs and not only take less sick leave, but also have fewer work-related accidents.

At the same time, one in five people become disabled when at work, 5.4 million working days are lost each year to repetitive strain injury alone and medical retirement costs on average £200,000.

AbilityNet's MiDRAS is aimed at helping organisations respond to the challenge of workplace disability management efficiently.

"MiDRAS is an end-to-end solution that allows companies to access and deploy professional support for their employees without having to retain in-house experts," explains AbilityNet chief executive Nigel Lewis.

"With MiDRAS they can rest assured that they are reducing the threat and impact of litigation, are compliant with the current equality legislation (Equality Act 2010) and that they are employing and retaining the most talented people available to meet their business needs."

From initial referral, through evaluation, assessment, equipment supply, training and case management, MiDRAS's specialist team works alongside both in-house and third party occupational health and IT systems providers. Solutions might include both physical adjustments to computer hardware or software and ergonomic furniture.

Equally they might involve non-physical recommendations such as changes to hours worked, a phased return to the workplace, reduction of travel, redeployment or home-working. ■

www.abilitynet.org.uk/midras

May date for national conference

Speeches from the Prime Minister and UK Digital Champion, Martha Lane Fox, as well as a performance by X Factor finalist Rebecca Ferguson, are just some of the highlights of Go on: ND11.

The event is the 6th National Digital Conference and takes place on May 11 and 12 at Old Billingsgate in London.

ND11 will address how to build a fully networked nation through partnership with Government, industry, charities and individuals.

AbilityNet's 'Access Zone' will offer attendees the opportunity to interact with some of the technology already on offer and learn more about how people with impairments can get on-line whatever their disability. ■

Green paper on SEN gets thumbs up from industry

Assistive technology could play a role in the Government's aim of reducing the number of children classed as having special educational needs (SEN), according to IT suppliers.

In a just published green paper the Government proposes to scrap SEN statements by 2014 and introduce school-based education, health and care plans covering children up to the age of 25.

The streamlined system, unveiled by children's minister Sarah Teather, would be backed by a single assessment process and the option of personal budgets for families of children with SEN to spend on support for their education.

The changes, hailed as the biggest shake-up in the system for 30 years and intended to cut bureaucracy, were welcomed by

companies providing assistive technology to children with SEN.

"It's an encouraging document: especially since it's not about cuts," Martin Littler, chairman of the British

Assistive Technology Association, told *Ability*.

He welcomed the fact money would be focused on children rather than schools, which were currently tempted to spend the cash for SEN on general items such as buildings.

He also praised a move back towards special

schools away from including disabled children in mainstream education and applauded specific mention of the need for more children to be provided with communication aids.

Mark McCusker, chief executive of Texthelp, said technology would help the government in its aim of reducing the proportion of children classed as

SEN by helping all children with their learning.

"Currently, 21% of children in the UK are classified with SEN: that must be the highest in Europe," he said. "There is a role for assistive technology to keep people out of the special category."

The green paper would be good for charities, which would have a greater role in assessing children's needs, said McCusker.

Littler questioned whether there was the expertise to carry out the single assessments, which will replace the complicated assessments that can involve up to 28 professionals.

"I'm not clear who will assess children's needs and where the 'trained key workers' will find their expertise.

"The answer is surely some regional centre of expertise and assessment. Otherwise locked-in ability is likely to stay locked in and potential will stay untapped just for lack of knowledge of what resources are available and what can help each child." ■

www.bataonline.org



Martin Littler, BATA

FAST offers £30 to web testers

The Foundation for Assistive Technology (FAST) is looking for disabled internet users to take part in a project to evaluate advanced websites and services.

The organisation, set up to improve the design of assistive equipment, wants to learn how people use the web in order to get a better idea of the barriers new web technologies might throw up.

The investigation is part of an EU funded project called *Inclusive Futures – Internet Web Services (i2Web)* intended to develop tools to make the web more inclusive. FAST is looking for people who are:

- Over 60
- Partially sighted and who are

experienced using a screenreader or screen magnifier to surf the internet

- Deaf or hard of hearing
- Restricted in the range of movements they can undertake on keyboards, remote controls or mobile phones and/or use an assistive technology to work with these devices.

Volunteers will be asked to spend two hours surfing the internet at FAST's evaluation suite at Tower Hill, London. They will also will be offered travel expenses and a £30 gift voucher.

Call Sam Collin on 0300 330 1430 or email sam@fastuk.org or visit <http://i2web.eu>

Fix the Web is 'pure genius' says Fry

Broadcaster Stephen Fry has thrown his weight behind Citizens Online's Fix the Web campaign.

The famous Tweeter has urged people to get involved in the project, which he describes as "pure genius".

Fry's support is guaranteed to give Fix the Web a boost. The campaign relies on volunteers to contact the owners of inaccessible sites reported by disabled surfers with a view to improving them.

Some 388 sites have been reported to Fix the Web's 296 volunteers since it launched last summer. So far 20 of them have been fixed. ■

www.fixtheweb.net

A string-driven thing

On *Ability*'s 20th anniversary, the magazine's founder Geoff Busby talks about his extraordinary life as a champion of technology for disabled people

The founder of *Ability* magazine Geoff Busby has achieved more than most people. His high flying career as a technologist and champion of disabled people has won him personal plaudits and public honours.

All the more amazing when his initial application to a special school was rejected on the grounds he was too disabled. Wheelchair user Busby is severely affected by cerebral palsy and is constantly attended by personal assistants who look after his physical needs and interpret his speech to people who do not know him well.

When *Ability* visited him recently at his Essex home, Busby was in a typically playful mood as he described his birth in 1943 during a thunderstorm in an air raid shelter in North London. "There was no midwife available – that's how I got cerebral palsy," he explained.

Busby's youthful appearance belies his more than 60 years and he seems to have lost little of the vigour that has fuelled decades of working for a better deal for disabled IT users: campaigning

that has been rewarded with an MBE, several honorary doctorates and the title of Essex Man of the Year.

He has strong views on the current debate over how to support disabled people.

"There is more and more politics in the provision of technology for disabled people," he says. "When it is all divided up and the NHS is paying for environmental controls and the Department for Work and Pensions is running Access to Work you are going to get confusion and overlaps. It can't be economical to do it this way."

One of Busby's constant themes is the need for

society to accept its responsibility for excluding disabled people from so many of the activities that everyone else enjoys. It's the social model of disability versus the medical model that looks to science to solve disabled people's difficulties.

"Disability is the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a society that takes little or no account of people who have impairments and thus excludes them from mainstream activity," he points out.

"Disabled people are those with impairments who are disabled by society."

This wouldn't happen so frequently if developers

of IT systems and other products built accessible features into them from the outset, argues Busby.

"I believe we need to create a society that is inclusive of the individuals within it. In particular, all systems should be accessible to people with impairments. As far as possible inclusive features should be built into mainstream products, to the commercial benefit of product developers themselves."

It would also help, he says, if charities

were a bit more clear-eyed about those they represented.

"Charities, to gain public support, project an image of people who are disabled as being unequal and worthy of sympathy. This is not helping to change the culture towards recognising the social model.

"In my experience the whole issue is very much individualistic, in that when you are confronted by people with impairments on a regular basis, the impairments tend to disappear and the person behind the image comes through."

This has been Busby's experience from a young age.



Geoff Busby with the first issue of *Ability* published in the summer of 1991

His father, who was an amateur inventor, made him a small cart in the family's garden shed that allowed Busby to push himself out onto the street to play with other children.

He was accepted by his playmates and was reluctant to go to a special school. With the backing of his parents, he went to court and won the right to be taught by a tutor at home.

In the meantime, Busby's keyboard skills were developing rapidly thanks to a series of adapted devices that he began using from the age of six. First he acquired a typewriter with two keyboards (one upper case and the other lower case) which Busby operated with a stick strapped to his hand.

String and a piece of wire

At university, Busby used his nose to strike the keys and developed a Heath Robinson arrangement of string and a piece of wire that allowed him to work the shift key using his foot. He continued with this set up as he began work as a programmer for the Ford Motor Company, developing and maintaining systems for accounts and stock control.

Busby was studying at Oakwood College in Essex, the first college for people with cerebral palsy, when Ford came looking for programmers. "I owe a huge debt to Ford: they trained me to program. We used paper tape, we had hardly any memory and we had to code every byte ourselves."

It wasn't long before he began working for the systems house Scicon, set up by BP. There he worked on a project for the Credit Suisse bank that involved developing a program that would tell the bank the best place to invest their money overnight.

With six weeks and with a budget of £5,000, Busby and a colleague called Jim Fowler completed the code on time by the skin of their teeth. "We worked over night and finished by nine o'clock. At first we couldn't get it to run but at the last minute I spotted a comma was missing.

"Then Jim took me to catch the train at Liverpool Street and we were told Credit Suisse had made £1m by the end of the first week."

By 1975, Busby had moved to the Marconi defence company, where he worked on weapons systems until, as he puts it, his conscience got the better of him and he transferred to programming Concorde's navigation systems.

Seeking sponsorship

Marconi was later to give him time off to spend on the BCS Disability Group, which was becoming increasingly demanding. "It wasn't hard in those days to get the attention of computer companies and I got a lot of sponsorship. I went to plenty of exhibitions and conferences: was asked to organise a village of

CREATING A COMMUNITY

Twenty years ago the newsletter of the British Computer Society Disability Group, chaired by Geoff Busby, became *Ability* magazine.

Under the editorship of Tom Mangan and with the help of Diane Whitehouse, the magazine set out to explore assistive technology against a background of growing internet use and the framing of tougher disability rights laws around the world.

As early issues of *Ability* make clear, the 1990s was a period of rapid innovation with technologies such as speech recognition, Braille keyboards and communications aids moving out of the laboratory and into general use.

The period also saw a number of new initiatives such as the setting up of the AbilityNet charity and the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act. Under Busby and Mangan, *Ability* charted these developments in a down-to-earth style and in the process created a community of enthusiasts.

accessible technology at Naidex (the big disability exhibition).

Busby was writing articles, attending meetings and getting himself known. He had been interested in what was called the man/machine interface after he saw an early touch screen on a trip to Japan. So, he jumped at the chance to design environmental controls for the famous BBC Micro, which in 1985 won a *Sunday Times* British Microcomputing Award.

He is still concerned about environmental controls and although he is happy with the EZ Keys XP and Grid 2 communication software he uses to speak through his PC, he is scathing about the "archaic" environmental system he has been provided by the NHS.

"It shouldn't be so badly designed," he says. "It should be incorporated into another piece of equipment or a mobile phone."

So what has Busby enjoyed most about his rich and varied career? "I have got most satisfaction from meeting the people I have met through my work," he says.

He counts Steve Shirley, the philanthropist founder of IT services company F International as a major influence on him. He visited her after seeing her appear on TV and she encouraged him to take up a career in IT.

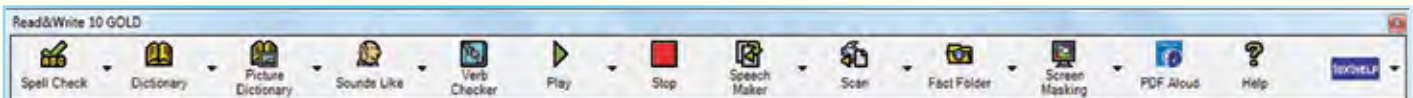
Although he has done a great deal to raise the profile of assistive technology, Busby says the job is far from done. "I have changed a few companies' ideas, persuading them to be more inclusive, but not enough, not enough." ■

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Spreading the word

Multi-function packages that help with reading and writing are becoming a lot more powerful, write Michael Pitcher and Jackie Harber

People with reading and writing difficulties live in a world totally dominated by words. The internet, emails, books, newspapers and even this article are completely inaccessible to some people and for others they present a constant challenge in their education, work and personal life.

Literacy support often comes in the form of one-to-one support from teachers and other professionals; helping individuals to create, compose, proof-read and absorb information. This type of support is extremely effective, but sometimes it can be difficult to access, very demanding for professionals and costly in resources.

Assistive software offers an alternative way of overcoming the challenges faced by people with reading and writing difficulties.

However, with the wide range of assistive software available it can often be confusing and sometimes expensive to provide individual programs to cover all the assistance required.

As technology has improved and developed, more and more people are exploring software packages that offer multiple features in one package.

This software, which is sometimes called multifunctional literacy support software, can offer greater flexibility, better value and more independence for the user. Typical features include text-to-speech, phonetic spell checkers, dictionary support and writing frameworks, among others.

But how does technology help? For reading support, people can use software to read back text so that they can 'hear' the words as if they were being spoken by another person.

This is known as text-to-speech or computer generated synthesised speech. A talking computer can act as a proof reader, helping you hear any mistakes or inconsistencies in your writing.

Technology can also reduce the strain of reading: for those with concentration or reading problems hearing and reading a long document is a lot easier than reading it conventionally.

Computer speech is also an important component

in software for teaching and is often used in spelling programs, for example to reinforce ideas using both sight and hearing. Documents, web pages and emails can be read back using this technology.

For books and other printed materials, users can scan these into a computer and have them read back. The voice type and speed can be changed to suit individual preferences and there is the added benefit of dual highlighting within some of the programs that can help users track along as the text is being read.

As well as hearing words read out, users can access dictionary definitions to aid comprehension and there is picture support for those with severe literacy difficulties.

For writing support, people can use software to help with word and sentence construction. This might be in the form of simple word banks or writing frames that can be configured with subject specific words and phrases that can be easily inserted into a document at a click of a button.

It might also be in the form of phonetic spelling support, whereby users are presented with a list of

alternative suggestions that can be read back with text-to-speech or explored further using dictionary definitions.



Technology provides a vital back-up to support from other people

Five of the best

There are a growing number of multifunction packages available, but choosing the right package will ultimately come down to a number of factors such as cost, functionality, ease of use and compatibility.

In the following section we look in more detail at five widely used packages. They fall into one of two broad categories: products that work with Windows and those that have their own environment for word processing and other applications.

Buyers may also want to consider whether a package is compatible with solutions that are already in place to reduce the need to learn new software.

Read&Write 10 GOLD and ClaroRead Plus V5.6 consist of a toolkit of applications to support literacy across the Windows environment. This global approach gives support wherever it is needed, within emails, on the

dyslexic?

hands-free computing



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internet and within Microsoft Office.

Both products support the use of scanners to convert printed materials such as books and magazines into Word documents.

During text-to-speech operations Read&Write provides simultaneous reading and dual highlighting of text. The sentence is highlighted in yellow and each word is coloured blue when spoken (although it is possible to change the colour combinations).

This encourages the user to 'read along' with the text and aids comprehension and focus.

ClaroRead instead has a focus feature that greys out everything except the sentence that it is currently reading, with each word highlighted as it is spoken.

Both packages offer a wide selection of electronic voices, and it is possible to change the speed and correct wrongly pronounced words. This is important as wrongly pronounced words can cause a loss of comprehension.

They also both enable text to be converted to audio files enabling text to be absorbed while away from the computer.

Read&Write's phonetic spell checking tool opens in a clear box displaying the sentence, word suggestions and dictionary definitions all of which are speech enabled.

A further tool will check the text for homophones – with example phrases and speech to help the user identify the correct 'sounds like' word for the context of their sentence.

ClaroRead enhances the proofing tools in Microsoft Word allowing the user to check for spelling and homophones at the same time.

There is picture support, dictionary definitions and synonyms displayed with easy access to the speech controls.

Both packages offer word prediction, a tool that can enable students to use more advanced vocabulary and potentially speed up typing for the slow typist.

Other tools included with Read&Write are dictionary and picture dictionary support, a verb checker, study skills tools such as highlighters (now includes Harvard style referencing), fact finder (to quickly do a web search) and a fact folder (to collect web research).

Claro Software's ClaroCapture also allows the user to collect information from various sources.

WriteOnline, Clicker and Solo offer literacy support within their own environment. Only Co:Writer, the word prediction part of the Solo Suite, can be used outside its own environment.

So, additional word processing packages such as Microsoft Word are not required, but no general support is provided across the Windows platform in programs such as the internet, email and Microsoft Office.

WriteOnline is a web-based tool offering wordbank support, prediction and text-to-speech whenever the

student has access to the web. It is also now possible to load the program onto a computer for use when the internet is not available.

There is also a concept mapping tool to help with the planning and organisation. Wordbanks – subject-specific stores of words – can be tailored to the curriculum with words and phrases available through point and click.

There is a large bank of readymade wordbanks and it is easy to create your own. The analysis tool will give an insight into how the student is working by giving a complete history of time spent creating the document, spelling errors and the 'pasted' text.

Documents created in WriteOnline can be saved in other formats such as Microsoft Word.

Clicker 5 offers reading and writing support for pupils of all abilities. This versatile software offers grid support, wordbanks, a talking word processor, switch support and over 1800 curriculum pictures to help with understanding.

The online LearningGrid portal offers a wealth of free grids to support students across the curriculum.

The grids are easy to develop 'in house' and offer a range of support from basic communication to foreign language support.

This program from Crick Software can be found in over 90% of UK primary schools but is often overlooked as a mainstream literacy support tool.

Extras for Clicker

Additional resources that can be purchased for Clicker include Oxford Reading Tree and Planet Wobble talking books, Clicker Phonics, a phonics program to help develop speaking and listening. Clicker Paint adds painting to the curriculum including switch users and foreign language support with Clicker MFL French and Spanish.

Documents created in Clicker can be saved in HTML format only. Word will open HTML documents, but the symbols are not retained.

Solo Suite is made up of four programs Read Out Loud to read web-based content and eBooks, Write Out Loud a talking word processor that includes spell and homophone checkers and a built in dictionary; a word prediction package called Co:Writer with topic specific vocabulary support; and Draft:Builder to help structure the writing. The software also has a bibliography tool to create citations.

The programs can be used separately or together within the Solo interface. Documents created in Write Out Loud can be exported into RTF format, however additional document headers such as bibliography and outline are also visible when opened in Microsoft Word. ■

Michael Pitcher and Jackie Harber are assistive technology specialists at systems company iansyst.

THE UK'S LEADING PACKAGES – continued in the box below

Package	Developer	Package price	Trial version	Available online or as download	Works with MS Word	Scanning support (Y/N)
ClaroRead Plus V5.6 www.clarosoftware.com	Claro Software	£159.99	15 days	download	yes	yes
Clicker 5 www.cricksoft.com/uk	Crick Software	£125.00	no	download	no	no
Ginger www.gingersoftware.com	Ginger	£127.24	yes	online	yes	no
Kurzweil 3000 www.sightandsound.co.uk	Kurzweil Educational Systems	£725.00	30 days	both	yes	yes
Read&Write 10 GOLD www.texthelp.com	Texthelp Systems	£320.00	30 days	both	yes	yes
WordQ, SpeakQ and Abbyy FineReader 10 www.assistiveitsolutions.com	Strategic Transitions	£239.00	30 days	download	yes	yes
Solo Literacy Suite 6 www.inclusive.co.uk	Don Johnston	£480.00	30 days	both	yes	no
WriteOnline www.cricksoft.com	Crick Software	£100 per year	yes	both	yes	no
Wynn Wizard www.sindhissystems.co.uk	Freedom Scientific	£310.00	30 days	download	yes	yes

Package	Highlighting (Y/N)	Number of voices	Audio formats	Word prediction	Study support	Dictionary
ClaroRead Plus V5.6 www.clarosoftware.com	yes	8 with optional extras	WAV, WMA and OGG	yes	yes	uses Word
Clicker 5 www.cricksoft.com/uk	yes	2 with optional extras	AU, ASF, AVI, AIFF, MID, MPG, MP3, SND, WAV, WMV	no	no	no
Ginger www.gingersoftware.com	yes	4	runs txt to speech	yes	no	yes
Kurzweil 3000 www.sightandsound.co.uk	yes	24	MP3, WAV	yes	yes	yes
Read&Write 10 GOLD www.texthelp.com	dual highlight	31	MP3, WAV	yes	yes	yes
WordQ, SpeakQ and Abbyy FineReader 10 www.assistiveitsolutions.com	yes	2 in 7 languages	no	yes	no	uses Word
Solo Literacy Suite 6 www.inclusive.co.uk	yes	2	runs txt to speech	yes	yes	yes
WriteOnline www.cricksoft.com	yes	1 with optional extras	runs txt to speech	yes	yes	no
Wynn Wizard www.sindhissystems.co.uk	yes	15 and 9 languages	MP3, WAV	yes	yes	yes

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Usability is key for older and disabled people

Siân Evans explains why new research shows that improving the usability of mobile phones will benefit all users – and industry too

Making it easier to use mobile phones will benefit everyone, not just older and disabled people, and release an as yet untapped consumer market, a research report from Ofcom's Communications Consumer Panel suggests.

And the mobile industry could be missing a trick if it shuns the needs of a burgeoning older consumer market.

The Panel commissioned the independent research charity, Ricability, to find out what consumers really thought about how easy mobiles are to use.

The research involved consumer testing of a wide range of currently available mobile phones. They talked to consumers from different backgrounds and ages, with and without disabilities.

The researchers found that a number of simple improvements could benefit all users, demonstrating that improving usability can have benefits for mainstream users while at the same time widening access for older and disabled users.

They also discovered that increased facility to customise could greatly increase usability for a wide range of users, including older and disabled users.

And finally they noted that older and disabled people often do not have the information they need to choose a phone that meets their needs, or know where to obtain that information.

Not a niche issue

Usability is clearly crucial for many older and disabled people, and without it many are unable to use mobile services at all. But, this does not mean it is a niche issue.

The Panel's research shows that all users appreciate phones that are easy to use. This is important because it means that the business case for increasing usability is much larger than people might otherwise assume.

It is also important for consumers. Increasingly, we are becoming more reliant on mobile phones, and it's not only

younger people. This is the trend that we will all take into our older age.

"The opportunity for operators to expand market share through offering more usable mobile phones is potentially significant," Panel chair Anna Bradley says.

"As baby-boomers move into the older bracket, they will bring with them a more consumer mindset and an appetite for well-designed products that meet their changing needs without compromising on style or function."

This fits well with the work that charity Age UK is doing, whose Consumer Markets Policy Adviser Gretel Jones sat on the Panel's expert advisory group on the research project. She also believes that the older consumer market holds great potential for industry, and agrees with the Consumer Panel that it is about time it develops goods and services older people actually want.

She says the facts and figures speak for themselves:

"While the consumer market is important to older people, they are equally important to the market. The European 65+ market is forecast to grow by 42% from 2010 to 2030, with the 15–64-year-old group declining by 4%."

When Age UK examined some of the barriers older consumers face it found evidence of age discrimination, stereotyping and poor design of goods and services. Jones says that among many products that came in for criticism, mobile phones were commonly cited: "They are difficult to use because the buttons are often shiny and too small for older people, who may have limited sight and dexterity."

She went on to quote one older person who felt that "mobile phones have so far been designed for those with 20/20 vision, petite and nimble fingers, who relish the challenge of mastering fiendishly complex menu systems".

These barriers mean that a significant proportion of the market is being neglected. In a saturated mobile market companies are missing a trick if they aren't prepared to make usability an essential element of the design and marketing process.

Bradley argues that to make improvements manufacturers need to "think usability from the start. This means taking the views of older and disabled people into account far more than they do now. It also means getting the basics right across all new mobile handsets, with a focus on those features that increase usability for all users".



**Emporia
LIFEplus**

Examples of changes that benefit everyone include being able to distinguish keys clearly by touch on non-touch screen phones. This would allow users to feel where one button ends and another begins. This can help people who cannot easily see the keys or who have dexterity impairments.

Ensuring that a phone can be used one-handed would not only make it easier for frequent users to multitask, but also mean that many partially sighted people could use a magnifier to read the keys.

As phones become more sophisticated, the ability to customise them to suit an individual's needs and preferences increases. This offers considerable potential for improving usability.

An array of customisable features

Manufacturers could offer a range of customisable features such as: text size; colour and contrast; backlighting and brightness; font characteristics; choice of icons or list-style menus; and audio and tactile feedback.

For those less familiar with mobile phones this kind of complex customisation can be daunting. That's why the Consumer Panel is also calling on manufacturers to create pre-set options on mobiles with some of the most useful already pre-loaded.

Choosing and buying a phone is also a major hurdle for many older and disabled consumers.

The first step is to find the information about the accessibility features of mobile phones to find one that meets your needs. But there is no industry-wide standard for the provision of consumer information.

Bradley says that this is why the Panel has recommended that manufacturers need to work with mobile operators, retailers and voluntary groups to provide information "so you know at-a-glance whether the mobile is likely to be suitable or not".

The Global Accessibility Reporting Initiative (GARI) set up by the Mobile Manufacturers Forum (MMF) is probably the best source of information about the accessibility features of many phones. GARI's database currently lists 95 attributes for each phone provided by manufacturers on a self assessment principle. But not all manufacturers belong to the initiative.

Armed with whatever information is available, consumers are then faced with the in-store experience. When the Consumer Panel asked older and disabled consumers about their experiences of buying a mobile phone in-store, many said that they felt alienated by the retail environment and confused by the jargon associated with mobile phones.

As one partially-sighted consumer put it: "We are best placed to know our own needs, but they should at least have training in awareness: to steer somebody down the

route to identify the right phone, the right phone for the right person by asking the right questions."

The Panel's report has revealed a significant business opportunity for companies willing to meet consumer needs. However, delivering change requires a different mindset. Mobile manufacturers, operators and retailers will need to work together with voluntary groups to understand the needs of older and disabled consumers. Crucially, they will need to involve them in the development process, and not slip into easy stereotypes.

"In an increasingly saturated market ignoring a sizeable segment of consumers would be foolish," Bradley concludes. ■



Doro PhoneEasy

For further information:

Making mobiles easier to use Communications Consumer Panel www.communicationsconsumerpanel.org.uk

The golden economy Age UK www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/archive/millions-over-65s-struggle-with-design-barriers-shopping-christmas/

PHONE TRIAL

Twelve phones were chosen for the trial from a total of around 200. The handsets were selected to represent the major design differences that might affect usability. The trials themselves involved users carrying out a series of tasks including making a phone call, editing a number and attaching a charger. The phones tested, which included two specialist phones from Emporia and Doro, were as follows:

- Apple iPhone
- Blackberry Curve 8520
- Doro PhoneEasy
- Emporia LIFEplus
- LG Renoir
- Nokia 2760
- Nokia 5800 XpressMusic
- Nokia 6210 Navigator
- Nokia 3310
- Nokia Mini N97
- Samsung GT-C3060
- Sony Ericson W380i Walkman

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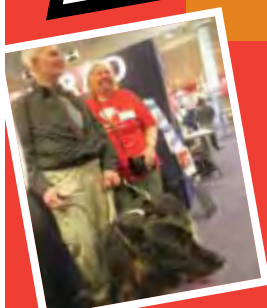
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Ed Vaizey, Minister for Communication, Culture and the Creative Industries, is confirmed as our keynote speaker. Other sessions will cover topics including the legal requirements for accessibility; the link between accessibility and usability; building your accessibility action plan; procurement for accessibility; the new British accessibility standard BS8878; apps and accessibility; and the workplace and workforce of the future – 'Accessibility means productivity'.

For more see:

www.headstar-events.com



Speech making

Voice technology is enjoying a renaissance thanks to accessibility laws, new mainstream applications and advances by developers

When three-year-old Edie told her mother she had a toothache it was a red letter day. It was the first time she had been able to communicate this most basic experience to her parent. Edie cannot speak; she had just used an electronic communication aid that spoke for her.

Speech technology is a vital help in everyday living for people who have difficulty speaking, reading text or operating the controls of a wide variety of computer and electronic products.

But until recently the uptake of the technology was slowed by problems with the cost and usability of voice recognition and text-to-speech software.

Speech recognition applications were slow and inaccurate, while text to speech users had to put up with strange pronunciations and robotic voices.

In order to conform to the Act, many manufacturers are going to use speech technologies so that commands can be made verbally using speech recognition, while messages and other information can be read aloud with the help of text-to-speech.

On the case

Companies such as pdf inventor Adobe are already making plans.

"The most immediate impact of this legislation on developers using Adobe tools will be the delivery of closed captions for video online," says Andrew Kirkpatrick, in charge of corporate accessibility for Adobe.

"This will be followed by the provision of accessible controls for video and video description to aid comprehension of content by users who are blind or visually-impaired."

The impact of the Act is likely to be felt by disabled people around the world as companies adapt their products and services for the all-important American market.

TV manufacturers are already tooling up to add Flash memory and voice processors to their sets.

In future, most televisions will be able to speak out menus and programme guides and obey spoken commands to select channels or make adjustments.

Large volumes mean it will cost a few dollars for two gigabytes of memory and a licence for speech software.

"Assistive markets sometimes drive innovation because of legal requirements," says Martin Reber of voice technology company SVOX, which is providing speech engines to many of the world's biggest TV makers.

Getting these devices to speak and recognise instructions at the same time is challenging, Reber admits. Developers must synchronise the talking and listening elements to create a dialogue.

However, SVOX has produced an interface for the TomTom sat nav that allows people to say any address in the US and hear an automated response at the same time.

Researchers have already produced more realistic voices and are now working on making them more expressive, so that their intonation fits better with the



Speech recognition offers a hands free interface

But developers have been working overtime on fixing these problems, spurred on by accessibility legislation and the popularity of smartphones and tablet computers.

The 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, signed by President Obama towards the end of last year, has already galvanised the high tech industry.

The Act, which will take effect in 12 months, is designed to increase access to video programming and play controls on TVs and internet browsers, as well as access to information via smartphones.

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KEYNOTES!



Hear **Google UK's Engineering Director, Dave Burke**, on Google's plans for cloud-based speech recognition for mobile and web, and **Professor Alex Waibel** on providing solutions to bridge the language divide.



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sense of what they are saying.

Much of the improvement is due to advances in natural language understanding.

However, not all speech technologies involve just slotting chips into a television. Solutions for people with severe disabilities often require more complex technology, training and long term support, as well as funding to buy the devices.

Communication aids for example – computers that allow people with speech impairments to assemble phrases using a keyboard or switch and have them read out – are a vital assistive technology, yet they are not readily available in the UK.

Efforts are being made to ensure more people have access to the aids. The government has designated 2011 as National Year of Communications with the aim of boosting awareness of the technology via a campaign called Hello.

Both experts and potential users are ignorant of what speech technology can do and of the fact that the cost of even state-of-the-art techniques such as eye gaze control has come down.

Assessing the potential demand

Charity Communications Matters is heading research aimed at find out more about the potential demand for communication aids with a view to improving the way they are supplied.

“There is no reliable data on who needs it and what it costs to provide it,” says Anna Reeves, national coordinator for alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) and a trustee of Communications Matters. “It is a postcode lottery. Provision round the country is variable.”

Reeves is delighted that communications aids are mentioned in the Government’s recent green paper consultation on improvements in the support of children who have special educational needs.

Mainstream demand for voice applications has taken off. As mobile handsets and portable devices such as tablet computers become more sophisticated, it has become increasingly difficult for users to manage the vast amounts of information stored on them.

Without the use of traditional keypads or buttons, the search function on smartphones and tablets can be hard to handle.

So, developers are providing speech systems to streamline the search process, help with making and accepting calls and having texts, emails and voice mails read aloud.

Products such as the Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice recognition program have made steady improvements in accuracy and in their ability to interface with other programs and devices.

THE 21ST CENTURY ACT'S ACCESSIBILITY TIMETABLE

- **Within one year the introduction of regulations to make ‘advanced communications services’ accessible to and usable by people with disabilities.**
- **Three years after passage of the Act, internet browsers built into mobile phones will need to support accessibility in the browser’s features and functions.**
- **Within six months, a schedule for requiring closed captions on video displayed online and for video delivered with captions on broadcast television.**
- **Within one year to start an investigation of the technical challenges and benefits of video description for online video.**
- **Regulations within 18-36 months that require access to the controls that accompany video programming such as play, pause, closed captioning and volume controls to enable access for people who are blind or visually impaired.**
- **Define regulations within 18-36 months which require on-screen menus and programme guides to be accessible to people who are blind or low-vision.**

Apps for iPhone and iPad have brought a whole range of speech technology within reach of disabled users. Communications aids on the iPhone, for example, are as much as seven or eight times cheaper than ‘conventional’ systems.

More work could be done to integrate speech technologies with the operating systems that control computers and other devices: at present programmers have to adapt their interfaces for each system.

It would also help if operating systems were designed from the outset to work with speech applications. And while programs have become much simpler to use, there are still too many complex commands for a user to remember.

The assistive technology market is often an afterthought for suppliers, which means products are not always best designed for disabled users.

Nevertheless, the happy combination of government action to improve accessibility, coupled with a flowering of speech technology in the mainstream for applications ranging from car controls to mobile phones and internet browsers can only be good news for people like Edie. ■

Take a break

Break reminder software helps prevent strain in the work place, but it could do a better job, argues Jan Mulligan

An estimated 1.3 million employees in the UK are suffering from “an illness they believed was caused or made worse by their current or past work”, according to the Heath and Safety Executive. Just over two thirds have musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), stress, depression or anxiety. Computer users who regularly work for hours on end without taking a break can end up suffering from eyestrain, headaches and aches and pains in their bodies. Break reminder software, which monitors how someone uses a computer and provides prompts that encourage them to take a break, is on the market and plays a vital part in preventing and managing some of these problems.

The technology could, however, do a better job. So far it just covers the tried and tested physical aspects of the causes of MSDs. Suppose it could provide a more realistic insight of an individual's state of well-being by including psychological factors, such as stress? Would users accept such systems in the workplace, and would they benefit? As an ergonomist, I encourage clients to become more aware of their postures and I am keen to point out that the best position is your next position. This is because the body is not designed to remain still for long. Despite this advice, and the vast array of workplace legislation in place, I find that computer users regularly work for hours on end without taking a break. Studies have demonstrated the beneficial impact that work breaks have on individual well-being, as well as on productivity. Work-based computer users, however, need support from their organisations in order to get the best from such MSD prevention programs.

Taking regular, short breaks from computer use throughout the day, when combined with gentle stretching exercises, have been shown to help prevent, reduce and manage MSDs, but it is not as simple as it sounds. Most office workers view a break as the deliberate act of stopping work and moving away from the desk, but tension will continue unless the individual makes a concerted effort to relax the eyes and body muscles. Micro-breaks, which may last anywhere from 30 seconds to five minutes, are long enough to allow for gentle stretching exercises, while being short enough not to disturb an individual's concentration. So, if active micro breaks are good for us, why do we not take them? On a very basic level, we forget. Break reminder applications encourage the user to take short breaks from computer use by providing visual and/or audio reminders. Typically, prompts are triggered either by counting activities, such as keystrokes, mouse clicks and the distance travelled by a mouse, or by simply monitoring the time taken from the last break. Some systems use a combination of both. Modern reminders are proactive. During the break they can display example stretching exercises and actively encourage the individual to perform them.

“We’ve successfully reduced the problems our users have experienced through these solutions,” says Steve Birch in facilities management at law firm White & Case. “Having tried out a reminder, I found the number of breaks I should be taking very surprising. I would often be so engrossed in work that I did not consciously realise the length of time I was spending on my PC, so I found the software very helpful.”

In search of better posture

The technology is becoming more sophisticated. PostureMinder, a utility which monitors the user based on time, uses a webcam to detect how someone is sitting and encourages them to adopt a better posture. It also monitors a worker's intake of drinks; providing prompts that help prevent dehydration (a 2% drop in hydration can lead to a 20% drop in concentration). None of the current systems take into account the user's psychological state and stress levels – yet we know that these factors can contribute to MSD symptoms. Emotion and feeling are displayed through facial expressions, hand gestures, posture, voice characteristics, and other physical manifestations. The ability to detect these cues and provide remedial action prompts could help relieve frustration and anxiety

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							ACTIVITY	TIME	POSTURE
Mousotron www.blacksunsoftware.com	Blacksun Software	Blacksun Software	Free	No	Windows	No	Yes	No	No
PostureMinder www.postureminder.co.uk	Postureminder	Postureminder	£24.99 HE, £54.99 PE	£29.99 HE, £59.98 PE, £176.25 CL	Windows	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
RSIBreak www.rsibreak.org	Tom Albers and Bram Schoenmakers	n/a	Free	No	Linux only	No			
RSIGuard www.keytools.com	Remedy Interactive	Keytools	No	£69.95	Windows; MAC OS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
SoundBreak www.lost.co.nz/software/soundbreak	Leon Mathews	n/a	Free	No	Windows	No	No	Yes	No
StretchBreak Pro www.paratec.com	Para Technologies	Hela of Sweden	£39.99	No	Windows; MAC OS	Yes	No	Yes	No
WorkPace www.wellworking.co.uk/store/software/workspace.html	Wellnomics	Wellworking	£57.75 plus 30-day trial	No	Windows	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
WorkRave www.intenct.info	IntenCT	n/a	Free	No	Windows; GNU/Linux	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
HE = Home Edition PE = Professional Edition CL = Corporate Licence									



Stretch breaks are vital in avoiding discomfort at work

accept such systems and respond positively to them?

before they have a chance to build, thus reducing the risk of stress-related health issues occurring.

This is technically possible, but should it be incorporated into persuasive technologies such as break reminder systems? Will users

wishes of users by involving them in the consultation process. The full results of our study will be published later this year.

Research shows that persuasive technologies, such as break reminders, are able to motivate, stimulate and even convince computer users to avoid bad habits and adopt good ones. They have the potential to play a key part in the prevention and reduction of MSDs and stress-related ill-health and yet the reported numbers of MSDs and stress-related ill-health remain high.

As break reminder systems develop further, they must not only consider the user's stress level, but address the worker's attitude to persuasive technology itself. They may also go on to incorporate environmental factors in the workplace that cause stress, such as heat, light and noise.

As the fight against MSDs continues it is important that we use technology to our advantage and build our armoury accordingly, but target it appropriately.

Above all, users need to be consulted. After all, there is no point in making an all-singing, all-dancing reminder if no one will use it. ■

Recent findings

A recent study, conducted by Rachel Benedyk of University College London and myself, considered user attitudes towards persuasive break reminder technology and explored the potential for systems that addressed both physical and psychological issues.

Study participants were asked to consider their attitude to systems like this and what conditions and situations might lead them to welcome such intervention.

Our analysis suggests that users who experience symptoms do not necessarily welcome intervention.

A combination of knowledge, understanding, control and trust is required. Employers and technology developers may gain greater insight into the needs and

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A touch of money

Mike Hendry looks at contactless systems that could make payments more accessible

Contactless payment systems that involve touching a card or other device onto a reader could be a real boon for people with physical or visual impairments that make signing or entering a PIN difficult.

Readers can be made quite large and prominent. They also rely on a clear sequence of lights and beeps rather than a small display, making them easier to locate and operate.

Contactless payment is an extension of the current payment card: using one is very like using an Oyster card or a modern concessionary travel card and involves holding the card against a reader for a fraction of a second.

No PIN or signature is required for transactions of less than £15 in the UK, although you do need to do a normal transaction (with a PIN or signature) occasionally in order to demonstrate that the card has not been lost or stolen.

The contactless function (provided by an aerial wound within the thickness of the card) can in principle be added to any credit, debit or prepaid card. So far the leading issuer has been Barclaycard, but the other major banks will start issuing them in large volumes during 2011.

The £15 transaction limit and need for a periodic PIN-based transaction mean that although the UK is in the vanguard in Europe both for the number of cards issued and for general acceptance of these

cards in shops, only a small number of stores accepts them: mostly coffee shops, fast food outlets and a few supermarkets.

Near-field communication (NFC) technology could remove many of these limitations. It allows contactless payment functions to be added to a mobile phone.

This could allow higher transaction limits, since it is easier for the card issuing bank to check that the card is still in the holder's possession, and would avoid the need for periodic chip and PIN transactions.

The obvious method is by entry of a PIN or password on the mobile keypad; but other methods that could be used include:

- selecting a sequence from a number of images
- voice recognition: the user says one of a number of phrases in response to a question
- fingerprint or face recognition using the phone's camera.

Since this is a communication between the cardholder and his or her own bank, the bank could offer several methods according to their customers' individual needs.

The user is familiar with his or her own phone, which may have assistive functions already installed such as large text, contrast enhancement or a modified keypad.

For the bank, it is a general way of authenticating a person or transaction; voice recognition and image selection have both been trialled by banks in the USA, but these trials have not yet moved beyond the laboratory in Europe.

NFC is also proposed for various assistive functions in healthcare (reading labels on pharmaceuticals), domestic living (reading a range of tags), direction-finding using a stick and so on.

NFC could also help users to identify shops offering contactless payment, or to identify and locate tills and terminals with this function.

Another limitation up to now has been the small number of phone models with NFC capability available in Europe (most phones sold in Korea and Japan have it).

Although NFC chips are already widely available in various formats, no actual assistive phones have integrated NFC functions, nor can they accept a micro-SD card fitted with an NFC antenna.

However, many new smartphones do have this capability: Nokia says that all its new phones will be NFC-enabled by the end of 2011, the new Android-based Google Nexus S has this capability, and it is widely rumoured that the iPhone 5 will have NFC built in.

These phones are already preferred by

Top: Google Nexus S phone
Bottom: Micro sd card



many disabled users because of the specific adaptations that can be downloaded for them.

While card-issuing banks and shops may be targeting their newest payment technologies at young, heavy mobile-users, they should perhaps consider first addressing the needs of those for whom mobile payment could be a real advantage, not just another gimmick. ■

Mike Hendry is an independent consultant specialising in card and electronic payment.

Website testing in Wales

The Digital Accessibility Centre, offering audits, user testing and training, has opened its doors in Neath, South Wales.

Set up by former Shaw Trust manager Cam Nicholl, the Centre aims to service the growing number of organisations that are looking to make their websites usable by disabled people.

The eight-strong company focuses on helping clients to conform to the recently introduced BS 8878 web accessibility standard.

Companies that have used the Centre's services include Channel 4, The Cabinet Office, Royal Mail and IT services company CAP Gemini.

"The 8878 standard has done considerable good in this area. It is realistic and focused on real life users," says Nicholl.

The Digital Accessibility Centre employs disabled testers with a variety of impairments who put websites and mobile devices through their paces. "At the end of the day it's about people not technology," explains Nicholl.

<http://digitalaccessibilitycentre.org>

UbiDuo plugs interpreter shortage

Sign language interpreter services are under pressure from cutbacks in funding and a shortage of interpreters.

But the UbiDuo wireless communicator, available from online retailer TechReady, could provide an alternative when an interpreter is not available.

The £1600 device – developed by US firm SComm and soon to be launched in the UK – enables deaf people to communicate face-to-face with hearing people via a keyboard and small, five line display.

The UbiDuo, which weighs under 3kg, consists of two units each with a keyboard and split screen display. The units can be locked together or used at distances of up to 150m.



The split-screen allows each person to type and read text at the same time. Users do not need to wait for the other person to finish typing before they respond.

The type size and background colour of the display can be adjusted and conversations can be saved and downloaded to a computer for storage or printing.

"Why can't deaf and hard of hearing people have the same communication rights as hearing people?" says UbiDuo chief executive Jason Curry.

www.techready.co.uk

Dyslexia handbook from BDA

The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) is publishing an updated Employment and Dyslexia Handbook this May. The Equality Act and the Access to Work support scheme mean that many employers must make sure they are providing for their dyslexic employees.

The BDA also provides a programme of events and bespoke training courses for employers to help them understand dyslexia and how to offer the best provision for their staff.

The Handbook features some 35 articles explaining what dyslexia is and its implications for dyslexic people and their employers.

www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/

Beyond Big Type

Inclusive design can lead to innovation and commercial advantage, says the Employers' Forum on Disability (EFD).

The EFD's annual Beyond Big Type workshop will take place in central London on 14 April showcasing the latest thinking in how to make accessible design and communication attractive.

Beyond Big Type was created

by design house Wire Design as a response to the lack of understanding by designers and their clients of accessibility and communication design.

The day-long workshop brings together top designers and communication professionals across all industry sectors, to explore and engage in creating a more inclusive approach to design.

Delegates will learn how to combine their own guidelines and industry standards while remaining innovative and maximising the impact of their design and marketing.

Places at the event start from £295 plus VAT.

For more information visit www.efd.org.uk/events/2011-03-full-day-masterclass-beyond-big-type

Code Factory makes Android talk

Code Factory has introduced an application that allows vision impaired users access to phones based on the Android smartphone operating system owned by Google.

Mobile Accessibility lets users navigate Android touch screens by means of a synthesised voice that reads out information as their finger moves across the screen.

It consists of a screen reader and 10 applications (Phone, Contacts, SMS, Alarm, Calendar, Email, Web, Where am I, Apps and Settings) that have been designed for the blind and visually impaired.

"Mobile Accessibility allows everyone, from beginners to the most tech-savvy, to use an Android phone, no matter if it has physical keys or is touch screen only," says Code Factory chief executive Eduard Sánchez.

The accessibility software supports all Android phones from version 2.1 and above.

www.codefactory.es



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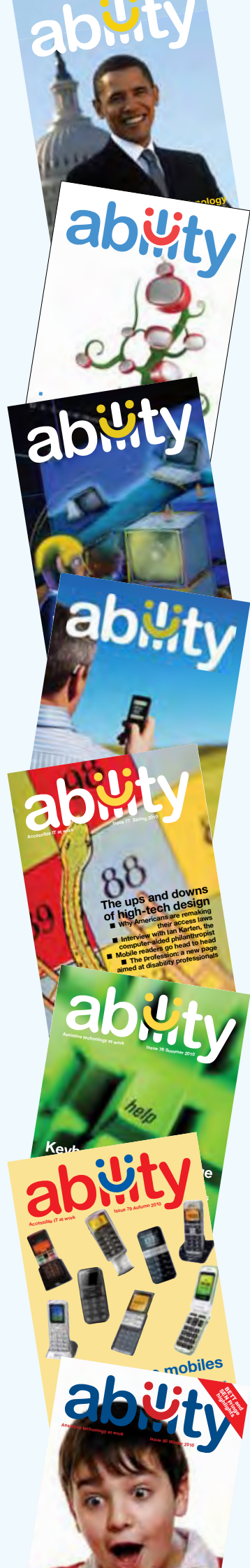
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Diary of events

TES EDUCATION 2010

23-24 April

Manchester Central (G-Mex Centre), Manchester

This year TES Education incorporates Special Needs North, the exhibition for SEN teachers and school support staff.

Fees: Continuing professional development sessions cost £12 plus VAT.

For further information: Go to www.teachingexhibitions.co.uk.

BRITISH DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

2-4 June

Harrogate International Conference Centre, Yorkshire

The theme of this year's conference, which takes place every three years, is 'Beyond Boundaries' reflecting the importance of interdisciplinary perspectives in understanding dyslexia. The event provides an opportunity for the exchange of information and best practice between practitioners, academic researchers and teachers. The conference programme includes topical symposia, workshops, interactive poster sessions and keynote lectures by world-leading experts.

Fees: Rates between £183 and £389 for students, members and non-members, according to length of stay.

For further information: email conference@bdadyslexia.org.uk or call 0845 251 9003.

COMMUNICATION MATTERS ROAD SHOWS

Shrewsbury 11 May; Newton Abbot 17 May; Horsham (West Sussex) 27 May; Carlisle 7 June; Belfast 21 June, Harrogate 5 July

The road shows provide an overview and an update of specialised communication aid technology for use by people with severe speech and communication impairment and writing difficulties.

Fees: None.

For further information: Email admin@communicationmatters.org.uk or visit www.communicationmatters.org.uk.

EVOLVING STANDARDS IN ACCESSIBILITY

25 May

BCS London, 5 Southampton Street

BS 8878 Web accessibility, Code of Practice is the first British Standard to address the growing challenge of digital inclusion and is referenced in the UK government's e-Accessibility Action plan. Its publication is especially timely given that the new Equality Act 2010 places an obligation on information providers to ensure their web products are accessible. This event will especially appeal to BCS members involved in web-based applications, systems development and anyone who wants to ensure their organisation is current on new accessibility standards.

Fees: Free, but booking is mandatory.

For further information: go to www.bcs.org/category/15015.

SPEECHTEK EUROPE

25-26 May

Copthorne Tara Hotel, London

How innovative speech technologies are enhancing assistive technologies. Dave Burke, Google UK's engineering director and Professor Alex Waibel are among the speakers.

Fees: Two-day pass booked up to April 29 £685 plus VAT. Full price £735 plus VAT. One-day pass £410 plus VAT and £435 plus VAT after April 29. Workshop only £190 plus VAT.

For further information: www.speechtek.com/europe2011.

VISION UK 2011

16 June

Queen Elizabeth 11 Conference Centre, London

The conference on eye health will focus on the changing external environment, discussing the 'Big Society', commissioning changes and recent advances in technology. Vision UK 2011 will incorporate the RNIB's Techshare conference with speakers from Apple, Research in Motion and Nokia.

Fees: Voluntary rate £65; non-voluntary £145.

For further information: Go to www.vision2020uk.org.uk.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DISABILITY PRACTITIONERS (NADP) ANNUAL CONFERENCE

27-28 June

Chesford Grange, Warwickshire

The theme for this year's conference is the Equality Act, a key piece of legislation enacted against a background of economic challenge. The keynote speaker will be Sir Bert Massey. The law firm Bond Pearce LLP will look at the legal implications of the Act.

Fees: Full rate for members £430, non-members £500. Single days £175 or £215.

For further information:

Call 01604 497933, email admin@nadp-uk.org or visit www.nadp-uk.org.

E-ACCESS 11

28 June

Westminster Conference Centre, London

Ed Vaizey, Minister for Communication, Culture and the Creative Industries, is the keynote speaker. He will follow up last year's launch of the Government's e-Accessibility Forum with a progress report to the accessibility community. Other sessions will cover topics including the legal requirements for accessibility; the link between accessibility and usability; building your accessibility action plan; procurement for accessibility; The new British accessibility standard BS8878; Apps and accessibility; and the workplace and workforce of the future – 'Accessibility means productivity'.

Fees: Not available at press time.

For further information: call Elodie Robertson on 01883 344799; email at elodie@headstar-events.com or visit the site at www.headstar-events.com.

Contacts

Ability magazine

Editorial, advertising and other enquiries: john.lamb@abilitymagazine.org.uk
www.abilitymagazine.org.uk

AbilityNet

Charity advising disabled people, employers and others on assistive IT.
0800 269545
www.abilitynet.org.uk

Directgov

Government site with help on employment, training, education, financial support, transport, rights and other issues for disabled people.
www.direct.gov.uk/en/disabledpeople/index.htm

Employers' Forum on Disability

Claims to be the world's leading employers' organization focused on disability as it affects business, including recruitment and retention of disabled staff and serving disabled customers.
www.efd.org.uk

Emptech

A database that provides information resources on assistive technologies, which are designed to help those with specific disabilities work and study. Emptech includes product descriptions, links to manufacturers, suppliers' addresses, as well as other related resources.
www.emptech.info

IT Can Help

Volunteers offering disabled people free local help with computers.
0800 269545
www.itcanhelp.org.uk

Leonard Cheshire

Disability care charity providing support services for people with physical disabilities and learning difficulties.
020 3242 0200
www.lcdisability.org

Shaw Trust

Charity that champions the abilities of disabled people, enabling over 60,000 people per year experiencing all types of disability to make the most of their skills, abilities and employment opportunities.
01225 716300
www.shaw-trust.org.uk

Suitability

Services to help employers fill vacancies and disabled people to get jobs. Part of charity Leonard Cheshire Disability.
0845 671 7173
www.lcdsuitability.org.uk

Remploy

Employment services for disabled people and employers, plus other business services, including IT equipment recycling.
www.rempoy.co.uk

U Can Do IT

A charity that provides computer training for blind, deaf and disabled people in their own homes.
020 7730 7766
www.ucandoit.org.uk

End of the grumbling world

Campaigners need to exploit new media to forge a new self help approach to disability rights says Kevin Carey

At an accessibility seminar in March, Gail Bradbrook of Fix-The-Web asked for a show of hands on how many people had heard of the service. Well over half raised their hands but when she asked how many people had reported an inaccessible site to the project, no hand went up.

Now, as regular readers will know, I'm pretty sceptical about disabled people spending their whole lives as disability ambassadors when they have other things to do, but I would have thought that sending a one-liner to a volunteer-staffed project that exists to right wrongs isn't asking too much unless, of course, we prefer grumbling to complaining.

But the grumbling world is coming to an end. While David Cameron's Big Society is currently entangled with public sector cuts, the likelihood is that most people in civil society and those they choose to serve will concentrate on fighting the cuts.

But, ultimately, what Cameron proposes will attain greater salience because we are emerging from the 'modernist' age of mass production and world wars, which required a high degree of public sector dirigisme.

This is not to say that we will revert to the 18th century arrangements for achieving social goals based on philanthropy but, rather, that we will move forward, on the basis of rights, to achieve their enjoyment through partnerships, relationships of trust and self regulation.

So it's time to file the mantra "We have a right to it now. And the Government must supply it".

No UK or US government has been elected on a manifesto of



Kevin Carey is Chair of RNIB (www.rnib.org.uk), and Chair of humanITy (www.humanity.org.uk)

increased taxation since Wilson and Johnson in 1964 in spite of increased longevity, improvements in medicine, increased defence costs and ecological commitments.

New Labour was criticised for not doing more for all kinds of people but we weren't prepared to vote for higher taxation so it resorted instead to cheap credit – and look where that got us!

There will have to be a new consensus, starting with self help and an assumption of a level of responsibility. This will have to start with the charity sector but it will need to percolate down through user groups to individual employers and employees.

But the Government also has its part to play. Instead of simply de-regulating, it should set out a platform of suspended regulation: if you behave well, we won't reinstate controls. There really is no point in employers moaning about red tape when they won't behave decently:

one man's cut in red tape is another man's death in a firework factory.

There was a case in the 20th century for Government-initiated regulation but there's no case for it now. It all depends on behaviour.

Where does that leave us? I think it leaves us with our rights base and the need to be persuasive on the individual case through developing personal relationships rather than campaigning for more abstract rights or more indiscriminate regulation.

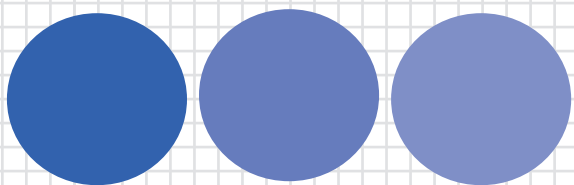
Even in the era of prosperity between 1997 and 2008 our gains were largely in theoretical rights rather than in funding our ability to enjoy them.

This change, however, requires a deep cultural shift. The disability sector has long been torn between its very proper assertion of human dignity and a tendency to lurch towards victimhood.

It's a difficult dichotomy for the public to absorb, calling as it does simultaneously for admiration and guilt. The trick is to couple dignity and enablement, not just in our mission statements but in our press statements.

We need to be more constructive; and that means exploiting the new, pluralist media environment. We no longer have to aim for national television and press on the one hand or complete oblivion on the other.

Viral messaging is now becoming a marketing strategy in its own right. We can learn from the campaign to preserve BBC 6 Music and to stop the Government's proposals on woodlands. I just wish we were as interested in real people as we are in music and trees; but that's the venal world we live in. ■



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