ability

Assistive technology at work

Issue 83 Autumn 2011

Top three screen readers on test

- Why PDFs should be right from the start
- How Lloyds adjusted to disabled staff
- Review of Sight Village exhibition
- RNIB's talking ATM campaign

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ability

Why maintaining access to assistive technology calls for constant vigilance

Who can we trust to get it right?

You couldn't make it up: the body that represents 100,000 UK solicitors makes an employee with cerebral palsy redundant and then has to pay compensation for failing to make reasonable adjustments.

Elizabeth Marshall was provided with a dodgy voice recognition system during tests to see whether she could take on another job in the organisation as a speechwriter (see opposite page). The person who presided over the affair was none other than the Law Society's diversity champion.

It is astonishing enough that a pillar of the establishment should end up being found guilty of discrimination, but that the Law Society fought the accusation is extraordinary. Clearly, the organisation thought it had a case or it would not have allowed the complaint to come before a tribunal.

The Law Society says it is committed to diversity, so *Ability* waded through a lengthy document describing the Disability Equality Scheme that Society, as a public body, has to provide by law.

Ominously, in view of current events, a 2006 survey revealed that nearly half of those polled did not believe the legal profession had a positive and constructive approach to disabled people. Now we know why.

Fortunately, there are employers who are making more of an effort to make it easier for workers. Lloyds Banking Group recently won a Technology4Good award for its steps to speed up the process by which disabled employees get the equipment and adjustments they need to work effectively (see page 15).

The bank has managed to cut the time it takes to get assistive technology to disabled workers in the bank from five months to 20 days. The Lloyds staffers we spoke too were full of praise for the bank's reasonable adjustment scheme, although, tellingly, both said they had found it difficult to get the help they needed when working elsewhere.

As we have often said in the past, for all the disability initiatives, conferences, and laws, the business of maintaining access to assistive technology calls for constant vigilance. If the Law Society can get it wrong, who can be trusted to get it right?

Obtaining the right assistive technology is not a problem for young, blind translator Allana Grant. She has three screen readers, which she tested recently to see how well they performed in various business related tasks. The article by Grant, who trained as a journalist, provides valuable insights into the capabilities of this type of software (see page 24). ■

Law Society found guilty of discrimination

The Law Society has been found guilty of failing to make reasonable adjustments for a disabled employee who uses voice input technology.

The organisation, which represents the UK's solicitors and advises the government on legislation, made solicitor Elizabeth Marshall redundant after she failed a test involving a voice recognition system.

Marshall, who has cerebral palsy, won unspecified compensation at a tribunal after she was made redundant from her post as a policy adviser to the body's president and chief executive.

She was asked to take a test to decide whether she could take up an alternative job as a speechwriter by director of corporate responsibility Stephen Ward, who is also the Law Society's diversity champion.

Marshall's disability means she cannot use a keyboard, but she said said she had to use a faulty voice recognition system in a noisy room and to handle too much paperwork during the test.

The Law Society, which is now reviewing its policies and procedures, runs a disability equality scheme.

The organisation says it is "committed to playing a leading role in the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of equality and diversity in all its activities as a regulator, representative body and an employer". ■

Ofcom wants more mobile phone makers to join access database

Leading mobile phone makers are under pressure to join an online database set up to tell disabled users about the accessible features of handsets.

Telecomms regulator Ofcom has written to the Mobile Manufacturers' Forum and asked it to persuade more companies to join the Forum's Global Accessibility Reporting Initiative (GARI) database and website.

Manufacturers mentioned by Ofcom include mainstream companies Research in Motion and HTC, as well as specialist suppliers Geemarc and Doro.

GARI is a database that allows consumers to search for a mobile phone model that meets their accessibility requirements.

"As you may know, in the UK, the handsets with the highest M and T ratings (for hearing aids) are produced by specialist manufacturers such as Doro and Geemarc, and are not currently listed on GARI," said Ofcom.

"Having specialist handsets with good hearing aid compatibility listed on GARI would be an excellent way of drawing them to the attention of both the general public and staff in shops, even if they are only available from specialist retailers."

Ofcom had been invited to comment on the GARI database; the organisation welcomed the initiative and made a number of suggestions for improving the way searches were carried out and the way features were described. ■

www.mobileaccessibility.info/

Majority of disabled at work could keep their jobs, says RNIB

The majority of people who quit work as a result of a disability believe they could have kept their job if they had been offered aids and adaptations, says the RNIB.

This is the conclusion of a report from the charity entitled Vocational Rehabilitation.

"Evidence from the Department of Work and Pensions shows that 92% of people who left work because of their disability or impairment felt that they could have stayed in their job had interventions been made," says the report.

The main benefits of employment retention are that it allows an employer to retain an employee's accumulated skills and experience, while the employee keeps their income and independence.

The report's author, Phillip Connolly, has set up an initiative called the Disability Resilience Network to help more disabled people find employment. The Network was launched last month and has attracted some 20 members.

Connolly believes that disabled people have much to offer employers in times of economic stress because of their resilience.

"The economy needs to become resilient so it needs resilient people," he said. He hopes to enlist the support of business groups such as the British Assistive Technology Association and the British Healthcare Trades Association who have an interest in helping the network to grow. ■

www.rnib.org.uk

philip.connolly@rnib.org.uk

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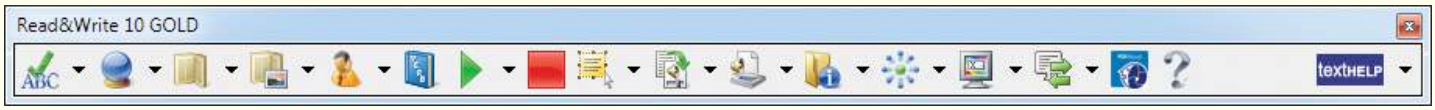

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Government rolls out accessibility initiatives

Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, has announced a slew of initiatives aimed at beefing up e-accessibility.

The government has set up a cabinet committee to push e-accessibility and given digital champion Martha Lane Fox e-accessibility as part of her brief.

"Too many people are excluded and we want to see that change," Vaizey told delegates at Headstar's e-Access conference, held in London this summer and co-sponsored by *Ability* and AbilityNet.

He said the Public Expenditure Committee Efficiency and Resources Group would bring together the government's activity on digital inclusion.

Vaizey said he was considering how the affordability and availability of assistive technology could be improved by designing equipment for all. His department is talking to the Department for Work and Pensions about how to bring down the cost of assistive technology under the Access to Work grant scheme.

It has also established an all-party parliamentary round table that has asked telecommunications companies for ideas on how to fund text relay services for deaf people in the UK in the future.

Telecommunications watchdog Ofcom is currently reviewing existing relay services for hearing and speech-impaired end-users and looking at new video relay services.

"We are not the same as the US – we have a different environment: we would rather push people than mandate legislation in this area," said Adrian Goodall, senior digital inclusion policy advisor at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. ■

Nigel Lewis of AbilityNet (right) and Adrian Goodall of the Department of Culture Media and Sport

Watch a YouTube video of the Minister's speech by going to this link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WdOZsIXdaA

Will beta.gov be more accessible than alpha.gov?

The Government has drafted in accessibility experts to improve beta.gov, the latest prototype single website for government information and services.

Its predecessor, alpha.gov, was criticised for a lack of accessibility. Léonie Watson of Nomensa has been recruited to lead a team of accessibility experts to improve it.

The portal, which will allow citizens to pay tax or apply for a driving licence, will take three years to build. The beta version will be unveiled next year.

"How did alpha.gov end up being so inaccessible, and how was a team recruited without any accessibility or usability specialists being included?" asked accessibility consultant Lucy Dodds.

Richard Pope, product lead for alpha.gov.uk said the move had been deliberate. "Accessibility should start with research and consideration, not with box-ticking or sprinkling a few standard accessibility features."

Adrian Goodall, senior digital inclusion policy advisor at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport said the inaccessibility of alphagov came as a surprise to him.

"We have to make sure something is done about it: it is not accessible and that's not good enough." ■

www.alpha.gov.uk

US disability groups tackle online suppliers

The National Association for the Deaf (NAD) in the US is suing online video company Netflix because movies it streams to subscribers over the net do not have captions.

The company, which has 60% of the US market for streamed movies, is accused of violating the Americans with Disabilities Act by not providing closed captioning for 'watch instantly' movies and TV streamed on the net.

In a similar move earlier this year, The National Federation for the Blind (NFB) called on the US government to investigate whether schools that adopt the Google Apps email and collaboration software run foul of civil rights laws.

Google applications such as Gmail, Calendar and Docs lacked accessibility features for blind people, the NFB claimed.

A report recently released by the Accessible Technology Initiative at California State University has cautioned US universities on adopting Google Apps for education due to accessibility issues found in these products. ■

RNIB launches campaign to make money machines talk

The RNIB has launched a campaign to get audio facilities enabled on Britain's 64,000 automatic teller machines (ATMs).

The charity is urging both blind and sighted members of the public to contact banks and ask them to turn on the voice output features already fitted on many ATM models.

The UK banking industry is missing out on at least 100,000 potential new ATM customers by not providing accessible cash machines, according to the RNIB.

"Despite the UK having the first ever ATM in the world, it has only 69 talking ATMs that are accessible to blind and partially sighted people, compared to more than 100,000 in the US," says the charity, which launched its Make Money Talk campaign in September.

In a recent Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) survey, researchers asked 500 blind and partially sighted people if they would use cash machines, regardless of whether they currently used them or not – 45% said yes.

"At the moment I can't use ATMs independently," said Mark Ellis of Essex, who is registered blind. "Basically because I'm blind I'm being discriminated against. ATMs can be used for so much these days such as mobile phone top ups but I'm being excluded because I can't see."

Many ATMs – such as this one with a headphone socket – already have audio features

There are almost two million people living with sight loss in the UK, of which nearly 400,000 are registered blind or partially sighted. ■

www.rnib.org.uk/

Eye gaze system works out users' intentions

Researchers at Royal Holloway, University of London, have developed eye gaze tracking software that can recognise the meaning of particular eye movements.

They have developed a program that works out how eye movements correspond with a disabled user's preferences and then manipulates designs on a screen to match them.

Visitors to the Science Museum have been able to try a dinosaur drawing program that researchers hope they can turn into a more general creative tool.

The subjects were not told to look for their favourite design, but allowed the computer to 'read their minds' through their eye movements. Eye gaze is an alternative to standard computer interfaces, such as the mouse, keyboard and joystick.

Dr Tim Holmes, from the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway and developer of the technology, said: "The ability to draw or build is something many of us take for granted and it's an important facilitator of cognitive development.

"However, even with the computer software to manipulate virtual equivalents of building bricks and crayons, many of these programs remain inaccessible to the physically and mentally disabled." ■

£1/2m prize for keeping older people connected

The Technology Strategy Board and the Design Council are offering businesses prizes worth £495,000 for ideas on how to help older people build and maintain social networks.

The Keeping Connected Business Challenge will look to develop innovative services that keep older adults better connected.

Teams of businesses and designers will pitch their ideas for a share of £495,000. An assessment panel will look for ideas for services that are innovative and with potential for commercial exploitation.

If successful the teams will have five months to develop their idea with professional support provided.

An ageing population offers an unprecedented opportunity for doing business differently, say the two sponsoring organisations. An estimated 80% of the UK's wealth is controlled by those aged over 50.

"One of the key elements of ageing is the need to continue to feel connected – to those we care about, to the places we live in and to the society of which we are a part," said Iain Gray, chief executive of the Technology Strategy Board.

"This competition provides businesses with a great opportunity to develop innovative services that meet a universal, and growing, future market." ■

www.keepingconnected.co.uk

Lack of money is hobbling AT, says FAST

Low levels of investment and lack of awareness are hampering efforts to develop new assistive technology services, according to the Foundation for Assistive Technology (FAST).

"The fiscal and social challenges facing the UK mean that assistive technology service providers, along with those in other public services, face an uncertain year," said FAST in its annual review of assistive technology research projects.

"While the joining up of health and social care services at a local level should result in more seamless assistive technology services, there is concern that restricted social care budgets will result in a short term reduction in the provision of assistive technology."

Many of the projects reporting this year explore the challenges that face disabled and older people when considering getting online or the potential impact of digital services for the delivery of health and social care.

There is noticeably less research, says FAST, looking at the broad range of assistive technologies that provide assistance with vision, hearing, daily living, housing, transport and maintaining mobility.

There are also changes to the funding streams and processes by which many disabled and older people access these different technologies.

There are continuing significant investment programmes to support the adoption of telecare and telehealth. The Department of Health has for the past two years been running the world's trial of telecare and telehealth technology, the Whole System Demonstrator (WSD) programme.

Around 30 projects designed to develop products and services that will improve the lives of older and disabled people are described in greater detail as examples of the potential for AT to transform people's lives.

These include Bristol University's work exploring how people with disabilities that severely limit their mobility and hand function can control a PC using tongue movements.

Other projects featured range from special shoes designed to minimise falls in older people to accessible bathroom designs, and a robot that provides daily reminders to support older people to live independently. ■

www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_127996.pdf

Campaign taps into expertise of disabled people

A Scottish charity has launched a new campaign to improve the quality of life for disabled people by including them in the design of services and everyday household products from their living rooms.

The Blackwood Foundation has launched the Bespoken campaign to recognise disabled people as experts on independent living at a time when many face increasingly significant barriers to living independently from benefits reform and cuts to care services.

Edinburgh-based The Blackwood Foundation has launched a social networking site www.bespoken.me to help people with disabilities share their tips on how to overcome everyday challenges they face with appliances and technology.

Social media site Bespoken will also be the first in the UK to connect users with developers to help disabled people improve the designs of everything from kitchens, computers and wheelchairs to can openers.

Bespoken was set up after research carried out by The Blackwood Foundation found poor design of homes and household products often left people living with a physical or sensory disability feeling frustrated and excluded.

The research also found a lack of information available about the designs and availability of technology to support people who live independently.

Over a hundred disabled people across Scotland reported that poor design often left them feeling they had to rely on others for everyday tasks. And many said they couldn't afford products in the disability market so they had come up with 'do-it-yourself' solutions. ■

A Bespoken workshop in action

www.bespoken.me

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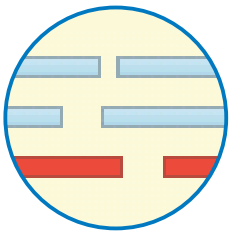

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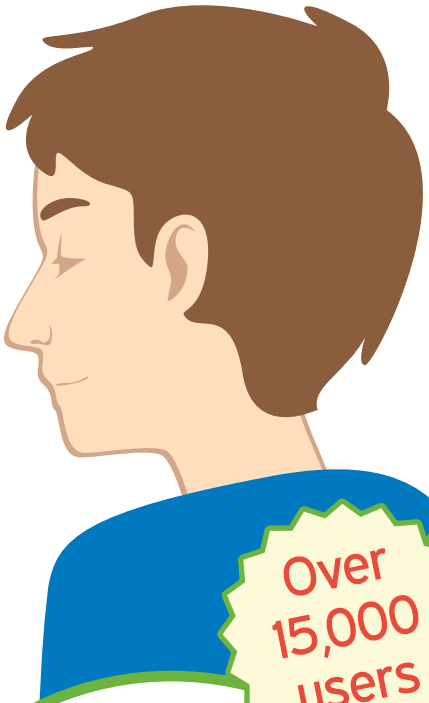

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Spending is up and numbers are down for Access to Work

The value of grants made under the Access to Work scheme rose by £6m last year.

Payouts rose from £105 million in the financial year April 2009 to March 2011 from £99m in the year 2009 to 2010.

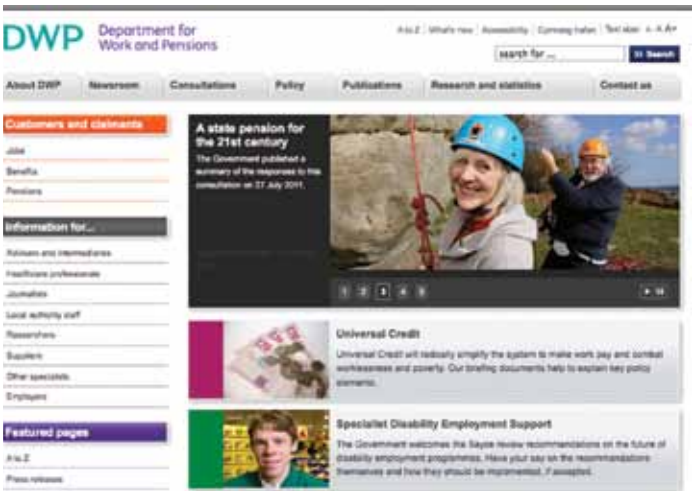
However, the number of disabled workers receiving grants for assistive technology and other help in the workplace fell from 37,270 in 2009-2010 to 35,380 in 2010-2011.

In addition, the number of people receiving help via Access to Work for the first time was down 20% over the same period; from 16,520 to 13,240.

The figures come against a background of calls to expand Access to Work. A review by Liz Sayce, chief executive of the disability organisation RADAR, recommended that the numbers helped by the scheme should be doubled.

The Department of Work and Pensions said the fall in the number of people making claims reflected an increase in employers' contributions for adaptations.

The range of products that can be claimed under Access to Work was dramatically reduced last year. Employers were expected to make up the difference.



RADAR described the fall in numbers as worrying and called for an investigation in to what lay behind the figures.

"In this time of increasing pressure on disabled people to find work amidst tough competition, and worse attitudes towards disabled people, Access to Work is a vital line of support," said a spokesperson for the organisation.

The Sayce review is out for public consultation until October 17. ■

www.dwp.gov.uk

US boom in sales of assistive technology

Sales of assistive technologies in the US are forecast to grow by 6% in the next five years from $41.1bn in 2011 to $55bn in 2016, according to a study by companiesandmarkets.com.

Vision and reading aids is the largest segment of the US market with a predicted compound annual growth rate of 6% during the 5-year period from 2011 to 2016.

This segment is expected to be worth $29.3bn in 2011 and nearly $39.2bn in 2016.

If glasses are excluded from the analysis, the largest product segment in 2010 was daily living aids, with 32.6% of the market.

This sector is valued at nearly $4bn in 2011. This should reach nearly $5bn in 2016.

Assistive technology encompasses a broad range of devices, from low-tech products such as eyeglasses and large-print books, to technologically sophisticated products such as voice synthesizers, Braille readers, and wireless monitoring devices. ■

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Changes could alarm emergency button users

Wireless alarm systems could become more prone to interference following a relaxation of the rules that govern how they are made, according to companies that make the devices.

The alarms are subject to an Electronic Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI) standard EN300 220. Recently the standard was revised, meaning that social alarm products no longer have to meet every aspect of the previous standard.

Critically, under the new standard, social alarms are exempted from rigorous rules on interference.

Social alarms are used by older people and those with a physical disability or a degenerative illness to communicate with support services in an emergency.

One of the larger social alarm service providers, Age UK, receives an average of 750,000 calls per year in the UK from such devices.

Social alarms rely on short range wireless communications between the alarm unit (as worn around the neck of a user) and household fixed line telephone systems.

When the button is pressed, the telephone system automatically generates a phone call to a support centre where the user can be helped or support dispatched.

Some wireless specialists have suggested that changes to the ETSI standard will lead to "system on a chip" solutions that will not provide the same level of reliability for social alarms.

"The revision of the standard enables chip manufacturers to embed short range wireless on the chip, providing a potentially less robust solution," said Grant Notman, head of sales & marketing at Wood & Douglas, a wireless manufacturer.

"This could cause false alarms through wireless interference or, in the worst case, even the failure of an emergency call to be received." ■

www.woodanddouglas.co.uk

BATA appoints Barbara Phillips as first executive director

Barbara Phillips has been made the first executive director for The British Assistive Technology Association (BATA).

She has pledged to change public perception of assistive technology and make it more accessible to those whose lives would be better through its use.

"As a society, we generally agree that those with mobility disabilities should have an appropriate wheelchair or similar device," said Phillips (pictured opposite).

"AT should be as much 'a right' as the wheelchair is now, and not something professionals, carers or users are made to feel is a luxury they can't quite afford."

The former high-flying civil servant was awarded a CBE in 2004 for Services to Trade and Industry.

She wants more professionals and those authorising educational and healthcare spend to see how AT can improve the quality of life, unlock potential and reduce expenditure on care. ■

www.bata-online.org

Ofcom picks up the baton on text relay

Phone users with hearing and speech impairments stand to benefit from changes to the UK's text relay service proposed by telecommunications regulator Ofcom.

Ofcom wants to see a 'next generation' text relay service introduced to support simultaneous two-way speech with live captions.

This will allow users to interrupt rather than having to say "go ahead" after each part of a conversation, improving the flow of conversation.

The organisation also wants to allow people to access services via mainstream devices such as PCs and netbooks as well as existing relay equipment.

By law, communications providers must provide text relay services for disabled consumers.

Text relay involves a relay assistant converting typed messages into speech and then back again, allowing consumers with hearing and speech impairments to communicate on the phone.

Ofcom is also setting out options for the introduction of video relay for British Sign Language (BSL) users. BSL signers – particularly those with low levels of literacy – find text relay services difficult to use.

Ofcom is seeking feedback on its plans and could introduce changes to text relay in 2013. The video relay could take longer because it involves agreeing who should provide the service, as well as restrictions on who can use it and when. ■

http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/telecoms-research/ofcom-relay-services/

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Bank charges

How one big financial player is upping its game on assistive technology

Lloyds Banking Group is taking steps to make it easier for disabled people to work in the company in a bid to boost their numbers.

The bank has overhauled its approach to accessibility by setting up a central fund for assistive technology and introducing a streamlined process for reasonable adjustments, winning a prestigious award for its approach.

And it has made efforts to change attitudes to disability among its managers.

The driving force behind the changes is the Disability Access Network, a voluntary group that runs a mentoring scheme and an assistive technology user group with 20 subject matter experts covering different types of assistive technology.

"We provide support to colleagues and new users and trial stuff such as websites before they get launched," said Joe Stoneman, who runs the assistive technology group.

Scrutiny before new websites go online

Web development staff have guidelines that lay out the accessibility issues that must be considered before new websites see the light of day and, with the help of disabled users, are producing much more accessible content.

"We are conscious of not excluding people by a failure of technology," Stoneman went on. "The last electronic publication about the Olympics (which the bank sponsors) was spot on: everything is pretty much being done in advance."

Graeme Whippy of the Lloyds Banking Group Disability Programme was responsible for the improved adjustment scheme. "The first design principle for this new workplace adjustment programme was making sure we were meeting the needs of an individual colleague," he explained after his scheme won a Technology4Good award.

"We wanted to reduce the complexity of the process and make it a one stop shop so one phone call, one email and we would sort it all out for you."

Target cut to just 20 days

One of the key targets was to cut the time it takes to get assistive technology to staff: from an average 20 weeks to 20 days.

"Workplace adjustments have been around for years: I had my first in 2007, but the process was incredibly drawn out," Stoneman explained to *Ability* when we visited him at one of Lloyds' London offices.

"The outcome was really good, but it took weeks and weeks. Now assessments can take three hours, software can be there in ten days. Within two weeks a system and training can be in place."

One step Lloyds took to make sure that assistive technology got to the people who needed it was to set up a central fund so that managers' own budgets were not affected by spending on disabled employees.

Graeme Whippy, Technology4Good winner

Lloyds Banking Group has contracted AbilityNet, the ICT charity, to carry out assessments, while supplier Microlink provides assistive technology and training.

"AbilityNet undertakes the workplace visits and they come back with a suite of recommendations," explained Stoneman.

Another of Stoneman's aims has been to increase the company's catalogue of technology products and he has already doubled the number that Microlink provides – from 12 to 25 – in seven months.

Brett Leverton, a wheelchair user who works at a call centre serving Lloyds' insurance arm in Bournemouth, is a beneficiary

of the programme. He is enthusiastic about the changes.

"A year ago I was recommended to have a smaller keyboard and a bigger screen; it took two-and-a-half weeks for the equipment to arrive," he said, explaining that he left his previous employment because of a lack of adjustments.

Joanna Hill works as a senior assistant in control and marketing, checking that the bank's dealings comply with the regulations that govern banking. "Over the last two years access has been having a much greater profile," she told *Ability*.

"It is the first time I have had this type of support," said Hill, who was diagnosed with dyslexia aged nine. "In my working career it has never been taken seriously. It is a welcome relief."

Hill recently went through the company's reasonable adjustment programme, which involves assessments of up to six hours, the provision of assistive technology and training in how to use it.

Stoneman, who says he nagged Hill into having a workplace adjustment, is particularly concerned that the needs of people with dyslexia are met. Only three per cent of employees are known to have problems in this area, when the norm in the population as a whole is 10 per cent. "There is a real reluctance to say 'I have a problem with this'," he pointed out.

Brett Leverton: enthusiastic about workplace changes

Promoting awareness

Lloyds Banking Group has also been doing its best to make its over 100,000 employees more aware of the needs of disabled staff. An address by paralympian athlete Tami Grey Thompson at a disability event in Edinburgh will be broadcast to Lloyds employees in five cities around the country later this year.

Organised by Lloyds' Access Disability Network, the event is likely to command attention by dint of the fact it is hosted by the bank's group operations director Mark Fisher, who is the sponsoring executive for disability.

Stoneman is aware that the number of disabled people Lloyds employs is not as high as that of some of its competitors. "We are conscious that our recruitment of disabled graduates is outside industry benchmarks," he acknowledges.

This year the bank carried out research into the career aspirations of disabled undergraduates. As a result of a student survey, Lloyds is making it easier for applicants to request adjustments and is planning specific campus events for disabled students as part of a long-term programme to attract more disabled applicants.

Candidates with dyslexia get more time to complete assessment centre tests and tests are available in alternative formats for blind candidates.

The bank launched a new career development site for disabled managers last year, to equip them with the skills they need to reach senior management positions. It also sponsored and launched the Radiate Network with the disability charity RADAR – the UK's first network for senior disabled leaders.

As in many organisations, some line managers are unaware of disability issues: often because they haven't dealt with someone who has an impairment. The bank has produced a guide to disability and later this year all managers will go for training on disability. ■

Joanna Hill has seen many things improve

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Sight Village is organised by Queen Alexandra College.
A National College for People with Visual Impairment and/or Other Disabilities.
Raising funds for QAC Registered Charity No. 1065794

www.qacsightvillage.org.uk

Village life

Self-confessed technophobe Marie Conyers gives us her take on Sight Village, the UK's biggest assistive technology exhibition

As a psychoanalyst and journalist I have embraced PC technology with some reluctance.

When I was asked by *Ability* to review Queen Alexandra College's 18th Sight Village in Birmingham, I set out with a degree of trepidation.

So, it was somewhat frustrating that our sat nav could not quite send us in the right direction to the venue.

My mission was to find products that had a user friendly approach to technology, offered realistic value for money and could demonstrate day-to-day usefulness.

The portable VisioBook from Pamtrad, the UK distributor for Eschenbach Baum in Germany, is one of the more recent innovations aimed at professionals, educational services and libraries.

VisioBook is a compact portable desktop magnifier. The HD camera offers viewing at close and long range complete with a small foldaway viewing screen.

It is battery operated, with four hours charge for continuous usage. VisioBook has a life of 2,500 separate charges and weighs just 7lbs with a neat folding action.

The 12.1 inch HD monitor shows vivid colours with a crystal clear image and can be easily set up and folded down in a few seconds into a drawer. A 'snip' at £3000 and even comes with its own carrying bag. (www.pamtrad.co.uk)

Another product which caught my attention was the MagniLink Student, a portable flat screen magnifier. Ideal for students or professionals needing combined reading, close up and distance viewing, with a neat swivel head camera rotating a full 360 degrees.

It costs £3,000 from Low Vision International, but both magnifiers could be eligible for an Access to Work or Local Authority education grant. (www.lvi.se)

One piece of technology that even the most timid of us embraces is the mobile phone.

I was therefore keen to see new products that might have a wider use – not only for those with visual impairment but also for the growing numbers of the elderly population in the UK and Europe.

I was struck by the sleek design by Cobalt Systems of their new Amplicom mobile on the Orange Network and Pay as You Go tariff. Silver in colour, the telephone costs £64.95.

It has a nice clear font and is good for texts with a wide screen. It is a pity that Pay as You Go is not always practical or economical for busy professionals or the more advanced user. (www.cobolt.co.uk)

Amplicom mobiles available with an Orange contract

By comparison, Clearsound, an innovative company that crosses the divide between hearing and visually impaired people, has produced the new CL8400 amplified Clamshell mobile, more commonly known to us technophobes as a flip-phone.

At a cost of £99.99, the CL8400 is a bit more expensive but does give the added advantage of flexibility, with connection to all the main airway service providers with the exception of the phone company 3. (www.geemarc.com)

None of the mobiles seen at Sight Village offer anything more complicated than basic phone and text usage.

Do those with visual impairments not need or wish to have more extensive applications such as a camera, internet access and Bluetooth connectivity?

Worthy of mention

One emerging company not so widely known but equally deserving of mention is Azabat.

The company has an extensive experience of IT and computer software and has developed a wide range of products incorporating sound technology on CD ROM so they can be used on any PC.

The wide range of CD ROMs includes games such as

Sudoku, uxb1, battleships and more.

The touch-typing tutorial software, from introductory level through to advanced, gives audible lessons on how to become computer literate: that's one thing for my shopping bag.

Audible crosswords and a talking word processor are available on low cost CD ROMs at £20 to £30.

We asked a couple of willing teenage guinea pigs to give their critical appraisal of the games.

In the main their response was enthusiastic, they said the games were easy to install and play with a clear good English voice. On some PCs the mouse went a little awry but overall they liked and approved of the concept.

For an extra £20 each, users can buy a 2Gb USB drive to carry documents around and an email service that uses Azabat servers. Who knows, one step to the future could well see the X-box Kinect adapted for the visually impaired. (www.azabat.co.uk)

Audio libraries

I wandered over to enquire about multimedia audio libraries. Free online library Seeing Ear offers up to 2,000 books that can be streamed and read in large font, or with print and background colours to aid dyslexic reading. (www.seeingear.org)

The inherent drawback of such systems is that they obviously rely on access to a PC with audio and text enhancement such as Zoomtext or Kurzweil.

I was intrigued to learn what innovations might be emerging for audio downloading into private homes or libraries. I was to be disappointed.

While Solutions Radio has produced Sonata, a sturdy internet receiving audible radio that can pick up podcasts and every radio station worldwide, the company currently only has 3,000 titles in its library.

On the bright side, Sonata is easy to use with only five large buttons to operate. I enquired why the company is not liaising with commercial websites such as Audible.co.uk, which holds nearly 1m titles in its library.

I was relieved to learn they were trying to overcome difficulties in technically compatible areas so as to access a much wider choice and bigger library, eventually.

Sonata can be obtained through the British Wireless for the Blind Fund (BWBF) and is free for those registered visually impaired or in receipt of benefit. (www.blind.org.uk)

Ultimately I have to come out and say which product impressed me most for its global accessibility and usefulness for visually impaired people.

The company Geemarc Clearsound has a range of most innovative gadgets and gizmos.

The Step-Hear solution to guide visually impaired users to ATMs, railway stations and bus stops has been widely adopted, tried and tested in America, Israel, Poland and other European countries.

The system uses two units – a base and an activator. The activator is a small wristwatch device, worn on the arm. When in range of the base unit, the activator vibrates, emitting an increasing bleep alerting the user to the presence of an ATM or other point of interest.

A pre-recorded voice message from the base unit guides the individual to their destination. The base unit can also emit an alert that a person needing assistance is in the area.

Dynamic Control's iphone app

Step-Hear can improve orientation in unfamiliar surroundings and can be used as a permanent or temporary measure.

Sadly, in the UK, banks have discretionary powers whether to install such a device but have currently chosen not to do so but the company is still attempting to win them over.

Despite its huge success abroad, it is an indictment of our transport and banking system that this technology has currently not been adopted in the UK.

The base unit costs £169.99 and the activator retails at £32.99; these products offer good value for money: high tech and yet low cost.

Presumably, if this system became available on a national basis, there would need to be a scheme for visually impaired people to be trained and issued with an activator.

I was struck by the enthusiasm of this company. Call-Hear is another device that can be installed in shopping centres, hotels, hospitals, receptions areas and airports; a large visible panel with an oversized button, when depressed it alerts officials that assistance is required.

This may remove some of the accessibility barriers in very large areas. Ironically these two products are low cost and low tech so should appeal to all technophobics. (www.geemarc.com)

And was I impressed?

How to sum up a hugely ambitious event? Sight Village embraces all ages in its philosophy and aims to introduce the visually impaired and their families to new technology.

Ground breaking technology is at last being used to open up everyone's potential. I might not be able to remain a technophobic for too long, for who could resist such possibilities? ■

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NUANCE

On the move

How disabled users could benefit from a 'one web' philosophy

Getting to grips with mobile technology is a fragmentary prospect at best for many web developers.

There are so many browsers, apps and devices around that it is difficult to know which ones to support when considering how to make mobile content accessible.

While there has been a tremendous leap in mobile technology, it is important to remember that only the most high-end and recent devices can operate the latest technologies. Many phones around the world still cannot match the performance of the iPhone or HTC.

One web for all

For a few years now technologists have been developing a concept of 'One Web'; trying to end a long running debate about how to approach the mobile internet and also incorporate web access for disabled people on mobile devices such as phones and tablets.

One thing is sure; it is important not to think of the mobile web as a web of separate sites created just for mobiles.

Making a specific site for the iPhone, for example, harks back to the time when developers used to make websites specifically for IE4 and Netscape4 during the browser wars.

"This is a short term workaround that can exclude a large part of your demographics," says Christian Perera, technical support officer at Shaw Trust's Accessibility Services. "If you favour 60% of your mobile visitors what about the other 40% you are not catering for?"

Perera believes that there is a significant crossover between W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and the organisation's Mobile Web Best Practices Guidelines (MWBP), which is likely to provide the solution, provided it has the industry's full backing.

"The W3C is attempting to make the building blocks of websites as universal as possible through best practice principles.

"These will help reduce load times for mobile devices, ensure accessibility is considered at all stages of development and help evolve technology to the point where the device used to access the internet will not matter," says Perera.

Shaw Trust's Christian Perera

"But we aren't there yet. Everyone needs to be encouraged to follow the MWBP guidelines; browser developers also need to pioneer the next generation of browsers with functionality that will compliment the guidelines and push forward accessibility," he adds.

Easier to view

A lot of mobile browsers are developing innovations to help present websites in a more viewable manner. Opera Mobile and Mini have a feature called Small Screen Rendering, which you can turn on to format any web page just like a single column of content.

The Safari Browser also has a similar function called Reader, which makes reading webpage content an easier task.

Smart phones now have their own in-built accessibility features. These are beginning to bridge the divide between accessibility programs for the desktop and mobile devices.

Many disabled users find mobile technology a big help. Helen Russell, one of the Shaw Trust's web testers, has cone dystrophy, an eye condition that leaves her with low, monochrome vision and no depth perception.

Russell uses a combination of Zoomtext and electronic magnifiers to perform everyday work duties and has always felt restricted when it came to mobile devices.

"We introduced her to the iPhone4 with its impressive out-of-the-box accessibility features, which Helen played with briefly. She was so impressed; within a week or two she came into work with her own," Christian explains.

"If you were to ask her now, I think Helen would probably be quite a strong advocate for some of the latest mobile tablets and smart phones, which offer these types of accessibility advancements for free."

Although mobile devices are beginning to answer some of the accessibility questions being asked of them, it is also clear that the journey has to begin with the web developer; using all the tools at their disposal to create an environment usable by all and, more than this, accessible by all. ■

Web Access is sponsored by

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Ability at work

Why retrofitting PDFs for accessibility is so expensive

Accessibility expert Ted Hall of consultancy PWS looks at how to get it right from the start

Among web professionals it has long been accepted that retrofitting websites for accessibility is both highly inefficient and costly, and that accessibility should be built in from the start of any project.

In much the same way, taking an otherwise finished PDF and making it accessible after the fact will almost always be significantly more costly and time consuming than it would if the required accessibility features had been incorporated from the outset.

However, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, the inefficiencies of retrofitting PDFs for accessibility are not widely appreciated.

Most organisations, seemingly unaware that there is an alternative, routinely waste substantial resources commissioning unnecessary and costly retrospective PDF accessibility editing.

One reason for building accessibility into a PDF as you go is that there are several Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 'success criteria' that are difficult, if not impossible, to meet retrospectively.

Ensuring minimum colour contrast and that headings are descriptive of topic or purpose are just two examples. There are several others. In short, if you are serious about WCAG compliance you effectively have to build it in from the start.

A quick look at some typical document production workflows may shed some light on the root of the problem of the inefficiency of retrofitting PDFs for accessibility.

A highly simplified version of a workflow from the days when print was the only medium to consider might look like this:

1. Create content
2. Add styling and presentation
3. Publish

Currently, in order to produce accessible PDFs, most organisations add one further step just prior to publication:

1. Create content
2. Add styling and presentation
3. Add structure and other accessibility features
4. Publish

However, as stated previously, in the HTML world it is well understood that modern, accessible document production requires that stages 2 and 3 of the above are reversed, as follows:

1. Create content
2. Add structure and other accessibility features
3. Add styling and presentation
4. Publish

The crucial difference between the second and third of these workflows is that adding the required structural elements as you go (in the form of properly marked up headings, lists, tables etc) need not add much, if any, time to the process. It can even save time compared to a typical for-print workflow.

By contrast, if structure is not built in at source it will have to be added to the PDF later, via a process known as 'tagging'. But adding tags to a PDF retrospectively is, in most cases, less efficient by several orders of magnitude.

This is because the tags for each heading, table cell, link or list may need to be individually created or edited ñ a process that can take many days in a large document.

But it's not just about structure: the way you design your content can also have a critical impact on the costs of making it accessible. Data tables provide a good example of both.

If you simulate a table by using tabs to position data on a page rather than using a properly structured table, several hours of manual tagging may well be required later to fix it.

By contrast, the properly structured alternative will require little or no further work. In addition, a poorly designed layout for a data table (of which you will find examples in many an annual report) can add a further couple of hours' remedial work, whereas a well designed layout of exactly the same data will require none.

If you produce PDFs for online consumption you need in-depth knowledge of the relevant standards, technologies and techniques.

Armed with such knowledge it will be clear that accessibility should never be something that is bolted on at the end, but should be planned for and incorporated throughout the document production process.

Doing so will dramatically reduce the costs of making your PDFs accessible. ■

www.pws-ltd.com

Screen test

Allana Grant finds out how three of the world's leading screen readers perform on applications she uses to run her translation business and looks at some free alternatives

Purchasing a screen reader can be a difficult and complex process: the decision you make will influence the level of independence you experience on a daily basis in your home and at your workplace.

In this article I have tried to provide a balanced overview of three of the world's leading screen readers: JAWS for Windows v.12.01169, SuperNova v12.0 and Window-Eyes v7.5.1. I hope to help you reach an informed decision by thoroughly exploring the key aspects of each product: productivity, training, support and price.

JAWS for Windows is a screen reader with the option to output to a Braille display, which is manufactured by Freedom Scientific and distributed in the UK by Sight and Sound. JAWS is compatible with the following operating systems, Windows XP Home and Professional, Windows Vista and Windows 7.

SuperNova Access Suite, made and distributed in the UK by Dolphin, is a full screen reader offering magnification, speech and Braille support to all visually impaired users. It runs on many operating systems, network installations, Terminal Server and Citrix support.

Window-Eyes, a GW Micro product, which is distributed in the UK by Forcetenco is a full screen reader that supports all Braille displays. It is suited to all blind users and is compatible with Windows XP, Windows Server 2003/8, Windows Vista and Windows 7 (all 32/64-bit versions) and works with the world's most commonly used applications.

I wanted to find out how each screen reader would perform when faced with the demands of running a full time business so I obtained test copies of each one and carried out several tasks which are imperative to the functioning of my translation business, Translatorisch, which is supported by the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust (PSYBT).

Window-Eyes: a close second on browsing

MS Word 2010

I had a positive experience with all three screen readers when carrying out all the usual tasks involved in managing an MS 2010 word document. Navigation of the documents was easy using the arrow keys and reading commands.

You can detect features such as font, background colour and style by customising the relevant settings in the respective control panels. I was able to carry out tasks such as spell checking quickly and efficiently.

Adobe Acrobat

Once more, all three screen readers cope relatively well with the PDF format so long as you make sure that the reader's settings are configured to work in conjunction with those of Adobe.

Reading and navigating is managed by using the PC cursor with JAWS, the invisible cursor with Window-Eyes and the Dolphin cursor with SuperNova.

Alternatively, all the usual reading hotkeys should work too. A slight problem occurs with all three readers when they are confronted with a PDF that is a secure document and hasn't been set up to allow screen readers to access it or by text that is in the form of an image.

Book keeping

JAWS was the screen reader that worked best in conjunction with the book keeping program I use: PSYBT's specially designed practical books system is based on an Excel workbook with some tweaks.

JAWS is able to navigate all elements of the spreadsheets by using the arrow keys or the designated hot keys. You do, however, need to activate the JAWS cursor to detect links to the workbook's other pages.

SuperNova and Window-Eyes coped to a lesser extent with the Excel worksheets. All information is read using the arrow keys and designated Excel reading commands.

Column headings, row numbers, numeric values, comments, formulae and even groups of merged cells are read out using the PC cursor. I couldn't find a way to navigate to other pages of the workbook with either screen reader, which is problematic as I cannot access the summary page with my year's totals.

Dolphin points out that navigating between pages of an Excel workbook is achieved with control+pageup/pagedown, which is an Excel hotkey. SuperNova will announce the title and focused cell when switching to a new page.

Sending and receiving emails

All three screen readers work well with Outlook 2010. I could manage my two email accounts competently from Outlook, checking for new mail, sending and attaching files without hindrance.

Of particular note is the application Outlook Enhance, which you can download for Window-Eyes. It enables you to customise how various elements are spoken in message lists and easily access contact details or attachments. I also like the fact that JAWS now supports Outlook's new conversation view.

I wasn't quite as fortunate when it came to accessing emails through my email provider's homepages. I had most success with Yahoo when using JAWS. I've actually noticed a huge improvement in the latest version. Functions like move are much easier to use as JAWS now takes you directly to the folder list.

SuperNova and Window-Eyes slow down significantly when it comes to reading and navigating round this page. I found this was often the case with content that is more aesthetically pleasing. On the plus side, both readers do allow you to carry out all the usual functions without too much trouble and Dolphin acknowledges further improvements in SuperNova's screen reader web support are needed and is working on the issue.

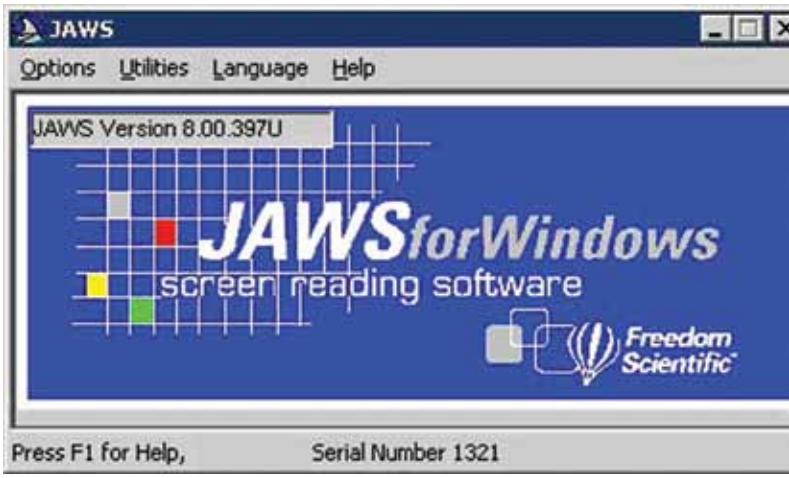
My personal GMX account, however, is not compatible with any of the three readers. You can read the folder names and even some of the buttons in each case but parts of the page are missing and the links are inaccessible.

Internet browsing

I found JAWS to be the most reliable screen reader when browsing the internet. Navigating, reading text and identifying all the elements of a web page is fast and easy using JAWS' PC cursor or the designated hot keys.

I was able to maintain my online business profiles on sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook and the Tutor Pages with the minimum of fuss and carry out transactions through digital banking quickly and efficiently.

I did have issues with graphics and buttons that are not clearly identified on social networking sites such as



Facebook. JAWS is the only screen reader that works consistently with chat functions. Flash content can be problematic too, with JAWS being unable to identify buttons and drop down menus.

Window-Eyes runs JAWS a very close second when it comes to internet browsing. I was able to carry out all of the tasks with just a little extra effort on my part. Using browse mode and the hot keys to navigate you can access as much information if not more than JAWS on occasion.

I also consistently found that Window-Eyes was better able to identify buttons and drop down menus than JAWS on social networking sites such as Facebook and MSN messenger because I could download apps from app Central to further enhance Window-Eyes' productivity; for example, an app that recognises icons such as smiley faces.

Window Eye's reaction times are slower when in browser mode and it is often necessary to refresh the page to speed things up or get to your next destination before the request times out.

SuperNova is the least consistent screen reader when browsing the web. Although you can generally navigate easily on the net using the Dolphin Cursor and hot keys or detect most elements of a page without hindrance, reaction times are again slower.

You may also often have issues with what is being read out loud or with the arrow keys. The cursor jumps around a lot of the time and so text becomes jumbled together. Furthermore, SuperNova doesn't cope well with Facebook pages with many buttons going unidentified and some links being inaccessible.

Chat was a particular issue: I was unable to tell who was on line as SuperNova cannot distinguish the graphic images. Chatting failed completely as I couldn't locate the relevant window or the messages I had been sent.

Magazines that are in Flash digital book format present a particular challenge to all three screen readers, in each case text and images are undetectable.

Another factor to consider when purchasing screen reading software is the training that is available. In the course of my research into the screen readers, I have discovered that training and support are readily available in a variety of formats and languages.

Sight and Sound, Dolphin and Forcetenco all provide clients with one to one or one to many training sessions with their certified or accredited trainers. Prices range from £250 to £280 for half a day and £395 to £450 for a full day for private individuals. Alternatively, Sight and Sound offers remote access training.

If you feel that you've already spent too much on the product and don't want the additional expense of purchasing training, never fear! There are plenty of other options to choose from.

The network of local blind societies known as 'Dolphin Friends' share their expertise in SuperNova with new users free of charge. This is subject to availability. GW Micro has a service called the info list; by subscribing users can keep an eye on the latest chat about the products, ask questions and swap tips with other members of the group.

All three products come with a user manual in several formats including Braille, print DAISY and electronic. In addition, each manufacturer has an impressive list of online training resources for download. The comprehensive list includes webinars, text files, technical support articles, audio tutorials and daisy files that are designed to help you get the most out of your chosen screen reader.

What you get for your money

I am aware that price is the deciding factor for many screen reader users as funding isn't always available. You have to explore all avenues to make sure you are getting value for money. JAWS seems to be value for money on the surface, coming in at £659 excluding VAT for a standard copy.

When you purchase JAWS you get a CD and manuals, three software updates, a single user licence agreement (installation of the product is permitted on three machines) and FS reader.

JAWS and SuperNova both incorporate this feature, allowing you to independently access ebooks and DAISY materials. You may buy a dongle conversion for a very reasonable £45, which will allow you to use JAWS on the move. The SuperNova package includes EasyReader, which is a text and audio ebook reader including support for DAISY.

However, that particular deal bucks the trend! Generally, if you are purchasing extras alongside JAWS they are very expensive. Software updates, SMA agreements and further user licence codes must be purchased separately.

In addition, the package doesn't include the add-on for remote access via Citrix and Terminal Server. You must also be aware that JAWS has different versions depending on whether you're running a 32- or 64-bit operating system, so just make sure you purchase the correct one!

The standalone screen reader element of the SuperNova Access Suite is the cheapest package at £495 excluding VAT. The complete suite, which includes screen reader, screen magnification and Braille support, costs £835 excluding VAT.

SuperNova is definitely the cheapest option for educational institutions, which must provide access to materials for people with varying levels of visual impairment: one integrated solution that works on all operating systems and avoids compatibility issues.

Included in the purchase price are a CD, manuals, single user licence agreement (the software can be installed on numerous computers providing you are the sole user), free software updates and Terminal Server and Citrix support which allows for remote access.

Once more, I was disappointed to find that buying additional products such as user licence and SMA agreements is rather costly. And although I was impressed by the SuperNova's USB pen option, the £900 price tag for the Access Suite is off putting to say the least.

Window-Eyes, priced £595 excluding VAT, is also good value for money in terms of what you actually get: CD and manuals, single user licence agreement (installation of the software is permitted on multiple PCs

so long as you are the only user), free software updates, access to more than 200 free applications from App Central, mobile options for Window-Eyes and remote desktop, plus Terminal Server and Citrix support.

Unfortunately, you do need to purchase multi-user licences if more than one person is using the software and you also need to obtain a SMA agreement separately at extra cost.

Which one comes out on top?

So to sum up, although the gap in productivity between the three screen readers has closed significantly; JAWS is in my opinion still the most powerful screen reader on the market today.

It is reliable, providing support for the most widely used applications as well as being highly customisable. It does, however, have room for improvement with flash content and iTunes. Freedom Scientific could in addition rethink the cost of add-ons and extras.

Window-Eyes comes a close second, working flawlessly with most programs and applications and giving you the option to download apps to improve productivity should you need them. It is also the best value for money given everything that is included in your purchase. There are however issues with reaction times and Flash content.

SuperNova, though a very stable product and the cheapest option for screen reader users and a practical option for institutions who must accommodate the needs of clients with varying degrees of visual impairment, does lag behind the other screen readers.

There are specific difficulties in reading web pages with complex layouts as well as major inconsistencies with social networking sites and Flash content.

Whatever decision you make, you can rest assured that the training and support that is available from all three distributers is top notch with a range of options. So happy buying! ■

www.yourdolphin.com
www.sightandsound.co.uk/
www.forcetenco.co.uk

Screen readers you don't have to pay for

In most cases, free screen readers are a reliable alternative to paid for ones. I feel that Non Visual Desktop Access (NVDA) in particular will be in a position to challenge the big names in the near future: it is constantly being developed and benefits from the financial support of Mozilla.

All free screen readers would be in a better position to compete if they had greater exposure to the public. Naturally, institutions are wary of unsupported technologies, but, as I have discovered, most function as well as their expensive counterparts.

Users of screen readers are often unaware of the existence of these free alternatives so if institutions such as the RNIB were to endorse them, we would feel much more confident about moving away from tradition.

NVDA

NVDA supports the most commonly used programs and applications without much customisation. It performs well with Microsoft Word and PDF documents and is notable for being one of the first screen readers to work with the Windows user account control dialogue boxes. Other noteworthy features are: NVDA's support for multiple languages, the talking installer and the option of loading it on to a USB stick for portability. The only real drawback is that it has issues with mouse pointers.

System access to go

System access is as efficient as NVDA. It has one outstanding advantage though: you can have a screen reader up and running in minutes by following the simple prompts on the website. Its performance with PDF documents is steady and its support for Microsoft Office is slightly better than NVDA's. However, what you gain in usability you lose in stability: with system access frequently freezing.

Apple Voice Over

While not technically a free screen reader, Apple Voice Over comes with every installation of the OSX 10.4 operating system. Unlike the other two, Voice Over isn't just a screen reader; it's a part of the systems software, giving it an edge over its windows counterparts, in areas such as viewing PDF documents.

No pre rendering of the document is necessary, just open it and start reading. As a result of the OS and screen reader integration being so tight, application compatibility is more reliable than with Windows systems. It must be said, however, that this is by no means foolproof.

In the blink of an eye

How cheaper eye gaze systems are helping users control computers and communicate

Lower-cost eye gaze systems that rely on cameras to track people's eye movements are increasingly being used by disabled people to communicate and go online.

Children are operating Tobii's £5,000 PCEye system to manipulate sensory rooms, play computer games and as an interface to communication aids software, says the supplier.

"Things often start with a sensory room, acquiring a sense of exploration and cause and effect before moving onto games, communication, and controlling their environment around them," says Hector Minto, Tobii's UK sales manager.

"There is a real opportunity to get more people online accessing critical social networks and local services using eye control."

Eye gaze systems estimate the point of gaze with extreme accuracy using image sensor technology that finds the user's eyes and calculates the point of gaze with mathematical algorithms.

With the right software anything someone can do with a computer and a keyboard and mouse, can be done with eye gaze by dwelling or blinking at objects on-screen.

Minto argues that eye gaze can be used by more users than just those using conventional communication aids. "Until today the assessment has been the key (to providing assistance) and that has involved looking at a specific communications aid," he told an audience of educationalists and speech experts at a recent workshop.

And the technology is within reach of more people. Prices for the typical Tobii product have fallen from £25,000 to £5,000 in recent years. "They will keep going down," Minto added.

Tobii has collaborated with Sensory Guru, a company that develops sensory environments manipulated by eye movement and gesture control.

Sensory Guru has launched 30 sensory apps for eye control including a sensory projection system called Magic Carpet that can be, among other things, used to play a game of football against able bodied participants using eye gaze.

Educational software company Inclusive Technology, assistive equipment maker QED and environmental control technology firm RSL Steeper have also adapted their products to make use of Tobii eye gaze systems.

"We are trying to persuade software developers to adapt their software for eye gaze," said Minto. "It is cognitively less demanding than a switch: eye gaze is extremely intuitive."

He also compared eye gaze favourably with touch screen technologies, which often require expensive and cumbersome modification; armrests, key guards and tremor control.

Sarah Ezekiel, who has motor neurone disease (MND), used a PCEye system to give delegates a presentation on how she uses eye gaze technology to shop, run her finances and keep in touch with other people by email, twitter and facebook.

After she was initially diagnosed with MND in 2000, Ezekiel was given an on-screen keyboard controlled by a switch strapped to her knee. However, she gave up when the switch kept slipping and did not use a computer for four years.

Later she tried using ezkeys communication software, but found she got a pain in her neck from a chin switch she used. However, Ezekiel has got on much better since she started using an eye gaze system this year.

"I was sceptical about eye gaze technology at first. I didn't believe that I would be able to do everything that I could do with a switch," she said.

I was pleasantly surprised. I can actually do more with eyegaze, like access my bank account and edit my website. I had to ask my carers, or children, to help me with those things before.

Ezekiel says she no longer feels isolated and depressed about having MND. She can contact other MND sufferers through forums, such as Patients Like Me or the MND Association forum. She can also email for medical help.

"Using my PC Eye was tiring initially, and I struggled to hit targets. Now I can write so quickly, which is much less tiring at the end of the day. I'm also very accurate, even though I wear glasses."

A second eye gaze user, nine-year-old Becky Tyler received a warm reception after her mother Fiona Tyler gave a talk about her achievements at the Chailey Heritage School in Sussex. Becky, despite considerable physical access issues, is ahead of her peer group in IT.

Eye gaze may be used by a lot more people in future as mainstream manufacturers add interfaces to their systems. PC company Lenovo has announced a prototype product illustrating its plans to incorporate eye gaze into its products. ■

www.tobii.com
www.sarahezekiel.com

Overseas aid

Suppliers aim to help other countries catch up in special needs

Assistive technology suppliers, facing public spending cuts at home, are looking to take their special educational needs (SEN) products and expertise abroad.

Although some companies have reported increased sales, education cuts are affecting others. One supplier reported sales in the UK down 36% in one month this year compared with the same period in 2010.

Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Spain were among the countries tipped as likely prospects at a recent seminar organised by the British Assistive Technology Association and UK Trade and Investment (UKTI), the government export promotion agency.

"It is not generally known how far ahead the UK is compared with the rest of the world," said Martin Littler, chair of BATA.

"Many of our schools have battened down the hatches and are not spending any money," said Lorraine Peterson, chief executive of NASEN.

However, she pointed out that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) had called for all children to be provided with a school place in its 1994 Salamanca Statement. Assistive technology was often the thing that enabled that to happen, she added.

UK special educational needs practice is the best in the world, Petersen said. UK companies had product resources and knowledge to share across the world and language was not necessarily a barrier.

Different countries managed support for disabled children in different ways. The ministry of health was responsible for SEN in many parts of the world. Often, parents were prepared to pay for assistive technology; in Malaysia, for example, where the economy was growing at six per cent.

"The UK has world leading know how and resources in special educational needs," said Richard Parry head of the education and skills sector of UKTI.

Speakers from UKTI outlined various schemes involving advice, training and financial help with researching markets and identifying overseas sales prospects.

They include Passport to Export for companies new to exporting and Gateway to Global Growth for more experienced overseas traders. Grants towards the cost of exhibiting at overseas trade shows are also available.

In embassies, commercial officers provide an overseas market introduction service and will arrange receptions, publicity and appointments. "It is chargeable, but you will know how much it will cost in advance," explained Graham Snape of UKTI.

Crick Software is one UK company that has established itself internationally. Although the firm, founded 18 years ago by John Crick, has a small staff of just 35, a half of its sales come from overseas.

Just under one third comes from the US and Canada, with the remainder coming from the rest of the world.

"First we were reactive, and then we started being more proactive," explained Crick. "That involved getting intelligence work done on different markets. We now have one person just doing international sales."

In 2001 Crick Software, whose main product is the Clicker literacy software, set up a US subsidiary. "It was very expensive, but important because Americans like American products: their terminology and the organisation of education is very different to ours," said Crick. "The good news is it (the subsidiary) is still working. The US market has been good recently with government Stimulus Funding going into education."

Last September Crick sold Clicker to 1,600 schools in Chile. The sale began with a contact at the BETT show 18 months earlier. The next year officials came to BETT again, but to make the sale Crick Software had to work through a Chilean reseller.

Crick explained his company thought about translating a new product during its development: for example, leaving space in dialogue boxes for less concise foreign languages. Crick Software also considered minimising the number of graphics changes by using screen shots that will work in different markets.

Shona Brown, a UKTI Trade Advisor in Madrid, gave her appraisal of prospects for SEN suppliers in Spain, the UK's seventh largest export market. The country was behind the UK in the use of educational technology, she said.

"The Spanish market for medical equipment and supplies is the ninth largest in the world. The Government will fund equipment if it is associated with mobility, but social services will not always fund equipment. Foundations and charities are significant players."

Nearly 20% of disabled children go to special schools, she pointed out, and very many of them privately run. Brown warned that suppliers might have to wait some time for payment: up to 600 days in some cases. ■

Useful Spanish sources for SEN suppliers:
www.discapnet.es
www.ceapat.es
www.iberdidac.org
www.catalogo-ceapat.prg

OneVoice's seven-step guide to accessible websites

The OneVoice for Accessible IT, a consortium of organisations involved in promoting accessibility, has published *The First Seven Steps to Accessible Websites*, a free online book aimed at website owners.

The consortium's online book details seven practical steps that website owners can take to ensure their sites are accessible.

The steps cover initial actions to check sites and establish policies through to simple technical steps to improve accessibility.

The book devotes a page for each step with background information, advice on implementation and links to good and bad examples. It also features instructional videos with closed captions.

"It is a response to the question posed by many website owners 'my website was not designed with accessibility as a consideration, I would like to improve the accessibility of my site how should I start?'," says author Peter Abrahams, accessibility practice leader at Bloor Research.

The seven steps are:

1. Quick accessibility check: get an estimate of how accessible your site is now.

2. Publish an Accessibility Policy; express your intent to be accessible.

3. Provide a Contact Us function: enable users to tell you easily about accessibility issues on your site.

4. Add jump to content link: simplify user navigation to page content.

5. Ensure tab sequence is logical and page navigation is simple

6. Add alternative text to pictures and links: provide necessary information for blind users.

7. Ensure text sizing works: allow users to increase text size.

Independent Vision launches magnifier hire service

A new hire service from Independent Vision aims to lower the cost of using expensive desktop magnifiers and reading machines.

Rentals cost between £50 and £70 per month for equipment retailing for upwards of £1,600.

Machines that have been hired out by the company so far include the ReadEasy Plus, Merlin, Acrobat and Presto.

"Our market is very varied; from individuals who want the equipment for home use but don't wish to use their capital, to employees who are awaiting funding for schemes such as Access to Work," says Jane Rumens of Independent Vision.

In the UK, people with significantly reduced vision can be formally registered as blind or partially sighted, the difference depends on the degree of visual loss. Being registered makes it easier to access support from social services.

Most electronic aids use a camera to create an enlarged image on a viewing screen. Other features can be incorporated, such as improved contrast between the object and the background and often object size can be changed using a zoom function.

Electronic magnifiers are not currently available through most NHS low vision clinics, but have to be bought privately. The majority of people with low vision have macular degeneration.

enquiries@ivmere.co.uk

Olympic travel website gives a steer to wheelchair users

The Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) has launched a travel website that enables wheelchair users looking to come to London 2012 to plan their routes a year ahead of the Games.

The online London 2012 spectator journey planner and travel pages – www.london2012.com/travel – marks the first time such a travel tool has been specifically created for an Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The Olympic travel website homepage

The website also gives information about which stations are wheelchair-friendly. It will help Games ticket holders to plot their routes to venues from anywhere in Great Britain by rail, coach, bus, river or Tube.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson said: 'I fully welcome the addition of a journey planner specifically for the Games, as it will help spectators plan well ahead of their events and takes into account a range of different transport modes available."

www.london2012.com/travel

Amplicom slows down messages to help audibility

Amplicom has introduced a stand-alone Digital Answering Machine that slows down or speeds up message playback, so helping users hear every word clearly without distorting the caller's voice.

The AB900 is designed for households with users of different hearing needs as the volume of a message can be increased up to seven times louder.

There is also tone adjustment to help with high and low frequency hearing loss. The £44.99 AB900 is simple to use straight out of the box, says Amplicom. Messages can also be accessed remotely.

www.hearingdirect.com

FAST helps elderly choose assistive technology

The Foundation for Assistive Technology (FAST) has launched a suite of training and briefing materials to help older people choose and use equipment.

"Changes to the way the state provides care services mean that increasing numbers of older people will be asked to make complex decisions about care options, including the purchase of equipment," says FAST.

And even though the choice of gadgets and aids to help with everyday living is growing, few people know what is available, or how and where they can get it.

FAST's free toolkit, Getting Equipped for Active Aging, is designed to fill this gap in awareness. The toolkit provides advice on what equipment is available, who to get it from and what questions to ask.

www.fastuk.org

Online tool tests how well firms treat disabled staff

The Employers' Forum on Disability (EFD) has launched an online management tool and benchmark that enables businesses to measure how well they cater for disabled people.

The disability organisation's Disability Standard, aimed at its 400 members, includes an expanded section on IT with questions on the accessibility of websites, intranets, phone systems, enterprise systems and outsourced IT services.

The greater emphasis on IT, which is one of 10 areas covered by the standard, follows EFD's setting up of the Business Taskforce on Assistive Technology.

The Taskforce is supported by IT chiefs at blue chip organisations including HMRC, B&Q, UBS and the Post Office.

"Over the years, organisations are showing improvement," said Suzi Mackenzie, senior disability consultant at EFD. "The Disability Standard has been designed as a planning framework to leverage change."

The Disability Standard consists of a self assessment tool that companies can use to gauge their performance. They have until June next year to submit results from the tool for evaluation. EFD makes bronze, silver and gold awards to organisations that perform above average.

The last EFD benchmark was conducted in 2009. This time the organisation hopes more line managers will be involved in the assessments.

www.disabilitystandard.com

IBM's smart cursor can be controlled by gestures

IBM has developed a prototype gesture controlled pointer as part of a summer intern programme called Extreme Blue, involving students from UK universities.

Four undergraduates worked on a 12-week project called Smart Cursor that resulted in a device that allows people with limited dexterity to control an on screen pointer using different parts of their body.

The students developed a sensor containing an accelerometer and a gyroscope that can record movement in three dimensions. They also devised a gesture recognition algorithm.

Users train the device to map gestures to commands that make the cursor go up and down and side to side (further work is needed to add diagonal movement to the system).

The system has to be 'calibrated' by repeating the same gesture 10 times in a training process that takes five minutes.

Although Microsoft has made the Kinect system for controlling Xbox games available to assistive technology researchers, the technology is not sensitive enough for cursor work, says IBM.

Another advantage of the smart cursor is that it has no compatibility problems: signals go straight to the operating system.

Mel Hopper, an IBMer who has MS and was a mentor on the project, said she had had difficulties using text to speech software to control her computer because it was not compatible with some graphical user interfaces.

http://www-05.ibm.com/employment/uk/extreme-blue/index.html

Scene & Heard adds iPad to interactive learning

Therapy Box has introduced an updated version of the Scene & Heard interactive learning application for the iPad.

Scene & Heard allows users to take a photo and then make it an interactive scene by adding hotspots and actions including recorded messages, videos, Widgit symbols and links to other scenes.

New features include multi tasking (it restarts an app just where the user left it last), scheduling, database optimisation and an improved user interface.

Scene & Heard is available through iTunes and costs £99, including support, pre installation and guides.

www.therapy-box.co.uk

Dolphin brings Internet Explorer 9 into focus

Dolphin Computer Access has released a free update for its SuperNova version 12 screen magnifier.

Internet Explorer 9 uses Direct2D, which is not compatible with existing font smoothing technologies.

Microsoft and Dolphin worked together to configure SuperNova's True Fonts font smoothing technology to support Internet Explorer 9.

www.yourdolphin.com/SuperNova

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Website: www.abilitymagazine.org.uk

Diary of events

LEARNING DISABILITY WALES CONFERENCE: BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

18 October
Swansea
Learning Disability Wales' conference this year is all about the empowerment of people with learning disabilities.
The day will explore how people with learning disabilities can be involved in the decisions that affect their lives; make a real difference in their communities and bring about positive change.
Fees: Learning Disability Wales Member £78.50; non member £110.50; people with learning disabilities £29.50; family carer or paid carer supporting a person with learning disabilities £29.50.
Further information: www.learningdisabilitywales.org.uk

QAC SIGHT VILLAGE LONDON

1-2 November
Kensington Town Hall
This exhibition showcases technology, support and services for people who are blind or visually impaired. Sight Village, run by Queen Alexandra's College in Birmingham, has grown into a series of exhibitions round the country.
Fees: None
Further information: www.qacsightvillage.org.uk

THE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION (ATIA) CONFERENCE

3-5 November
Renaissance Schaumburg Hotel and Convention Center, Schaumburg, Chicago
The ATIA conference, with 150 conference sessions and an exhibition of new products, features three educational events under one roof: the main conference with pre-conference seminars, the Enlighten low vision conference and an assistive technology research symposium.
Fees: Full price is $500 for three days.
Further information: www.atia.org

NADP AUTUMN CONFERENCE: NON MEDICAL HELPER SUPPORT – TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING FORWARD

7 November
Midland Hotel, Manchester
The conference will give delegates a chance to evaluate the quality of non-medical helper provision, particularly in relation to students experience; an opportunity to apprise the non medical helper charter that NADP is supporting; and a briefing on the role descriptor project commissioned by Student Finance England.
Fees: Members £150, non-members £180.
Further information: www.nadp-uk.org/events

DYSLEXIA AND TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION CONFERENCE

19 November
Fairley House School, Lambeth, London
The British Dyslexia Association is hosting this new, one-day event which has a programme of speakers, supported by practical, interactive workshops on how to bring technology into the school or home, to support children and young people with dyslexia and specific learning difficulties.
Fees: standard £150 including VAT, members £125, students £110.
Further information: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME IN HIGHER EDUCATION

23 November
Leeds Trinity University College
One day conference on supporting students with Asperger Syndrome in learning, teaching and assessment activities.
Fees: £95
Further information: Patricia Bannister, email: p.bannister@leedstrinity.ac.uk or ring 0113 283 7138.

RECENT ADVANCES IN ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND ENGINEERING (RAATE)

28 November
University of Warwick Conference Centre
RAATE 2011 is the only UK conference focused on the latest innovations and developments in assistive technology. This conference will be of interest to everyone who uses, works with, develops or conducts research on assistive technologies.
Fees: £150 inc VAT.
Further information: www.raate.org.uk

LEARNING DISABILITY TODAY LONDON EXHIBITION

29 November
Business Design Centre, London
Delegates can take part in a seminar programme, interactive zones and an exhibition of some 70 organisations and projects. Over 3,000 people are expected to attend.
Fees: £24. Free for people with learning disabilities, unwaged and family carers.
Further information: www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk, Tel: 0844 880 5061 or email info@pavpub.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.remploy.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

It is time to wizard away the last 20 years

The government should set up a body to sort ot accessibility, Kevin Carey proposes

This year we celebrate 20 years of the World Wide Web's emergence from CERN and 30 years of the PC but, from the perspective of people with disabilities, you would think that these were invented some time in the middle of last week.

I have just been in Ethiopia, for instance, advising the Government on its access technology policy and its training for XP trainers includes nothing on accessibility.

There were even centres for the blind and partially sighted where they didn't know about the magnification in the accessibility wizard; well, actually, they didn't even know about the wizard! But it happens here, too.

All of which leads me to hope that the whole episode of Windows and the web has been an anomalous nightmare and that we are coming into better times.

Again, instancing Ethiopia, I advised the Government to cut its expenditure on urban specialist technology centres for people with disabilities and to spend the money on talking mobiles for blind people; a proper SMS service for deaf people who can't listen to the radio; and PC tablets with a variety of add-ons for people with physical and learning/cognitive disabilities.

But as long as the West cynically continues to dump its old hardware in Africa under the pretence of benevolence, my report doesn't really stand a chance.

So as not to preach what I don't practice, I've been struggling with my new iPhone, alternating between rapt fascination and inclination to throw it out of the window; but at least it has the great virtue of allowing you to undo any error by pressing 'home' from any point with one push of a button.

I couldn't stop thinking about my new Apple when I went to the latest eAccessibility Forum at its new home in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

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

There was a discussion on Alpha.gov (http://alpha.gov.uk/), which was almost identical to previous discussions running back to the kiosks proposals of 1996.

Frankly, it wouldn't have taken a quarter of a century to get to grips with this problem if anybody had been genuinely passionate; but the twin charges of the 1990s that accessibility is too difficult and too expensive are still being repeated, answered by third sector stalwarts with their equally anachronistic mantra that we want it; we want it now; and Government should give it to us.

So I want to suggest a new way forward, not just as a columnist but as an advocate and an accessible IT expert: if the Government really wants progress with no regulation and only modest public expenditure, then it needs to put its weight behind an inter-sectoral body.

The body would be a place where the four major parties – industry, third sector, Government and academia – take each other equally seriously and where means are found to realise agreed ends.

Government needs to loosen control; industry needs to be less defensive; academics need to be led by user requirements; and the third sector needs to switch its emphasis from being right to being useful.

But none of these is possible without the other three. If the four parties are all right in saying that there's money in putting accessibility features into generic products, then there should be a good chance of an economic model.

If there is not a strong economic case, which is my position, then all the more reason for collaboration to realise accessibility features in generic products that would otherwise lack them.

Now I admit that regulars will have heard all this before from a variety of angles; but we don't want to waste another 20 years.

This is the age of Apple, Google/Android/Motorola and Microsoft/Nokia with RIM still independent (as I write) but the age of competition will likely not last; and the age which legislated the Apple breakthrough is long gone.

There is just an inkling of a chance in a market that is simultaneously mature but deeply contested, that accessibility might command enough market share to be worth the trouble. So if we want to make accessibility work in generic technologies, the time is now. ■

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www.re-adjust.co.uk
www.dyslexic.com
www.its4students.co.uk