Ability Newsletter

HeadMouse Extreme

The battle for effective computer control through head movement alone is hotting up, with the introduction of the HeadMouse Extreme, from Origin Instruments. As with similar devices, the user wears a small, reflective dot on his or her forehead or glasses, which is tracked by a camera-like unit attached to a standard or laptop computer screen. The device translates the movement of the head into cursor movement, giving the user hands-free pointer control. When used with mouse button software, such as Origin Instruments' Dragger, mouse clicks are performed by positioning the pointer and dwelling for a selectable period of time. Alternately, selections can be performed using an adaptive switch. When used with an on-screen keyboard, HeadMouse Extreme provides complete head-controlled computer access for either Windows or Macintosh platforms.

The HeadMouse Extreme is powered by the USB or PS/2 bus, with low (approximately 1-watt) power consumption. The small (3.7x 2.2x 0.5 inch) case and flexible mounting options give the user a range of options. The cost of the HeadMouse Extreme is US$995, probably landing here for an estimated price of A$1400. It will be available through Ability.

New products

New Expert Mouse trackball

The new Expert Mouse employs Kensington's Diamond Eye™ optical technology for smooth, precise cursor movement. Surrounding the ball is a Scroll Ring™ that gives scrolling capability to those able to use that function. The Expert Mouse comes with a soft, new (detachable) wrist rest. It also comes with the excellent MouseWorks software, enabling customisation of the four button functions.

The main difference between this model and the Expert Mouse Pro is that the Pro has a series of QuickLaunch buttons at the front (which most of our clients are unable to use). The new model has a smoother (optical - frictionless) ball movement.

System Requirements PC running Windows 98 or later with an available USB or PS2 port. Mac running OS X or later with an available USB Port. Internet connections or CD ROM drives to install the software. Model number: 64325 Price: A$149

NovaMind

NovaMind is a user-friendly program designed to create Mind Maps. It runs on Mac OS X. NovaMind translates your ideas, projects and information into a professional, easy to understand format. It helps organize your thoughts when planning, helps you to remember information and generate ideas, keeping you focused on the main issues in an easy and creative way. In education, for example, it could help you to plan classroom lessons, plan and present group projects & special activities, create concise well presented handouts, conduct brainstorming sessions, distribute assignment information and summarize books and research information into compact, easily understood Mind Maps. The Mind Maps can contain hyperlinks to other Mind Maps or other documents.

NovaMind may assist those who find it easier to think in pictures rather than just words. See it for yourself at www.nova-mind.com, where you can download a trial version. Cost is A$82.24

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Testing

Joystick-to-Mouse on games devices

We mentioned the new Joystick-to-Mouse software in the last issue. Since then we tested it on a USB games joystick and also on a games pad (similar to those used on the PlayStation). It works well, enabling these devices to function as mouse alternatives.

VTC Computer Based Training

We have been investigating alternative methods of providing training for Ability clients, in the area of general computer use and standard programs (such as Microsoft Word). We have recently been trialling CD Rom based computer training by the company VTC (Virtual Training Company). While we have not had a great deal of opportunity to trial these with many clients we have noticed a few things (good and bad):

1. the 'tutors' are generally clear and easy to understand

2. you don't need to have the program to run the tutorial

3. unfortunately it is structured more as a lecture; you sit, watch and listen but do not have the opportunity to actively participate

4. we have had some difficulty the interaction between the tutorial program and assistive technology, primarily the Smart Nav (we are still investigating this).

We have found that while this may be of benefit during the training process it is not sufficient to replace one-to-one contact for most people.

We are still investigating options, so if you know of or have used computer training packages and found them good, bad or otherwise please let us know.

Comment

Hardware

Networking - a looming problem area

As firms become more cautious and defensive with regard to their computer networks, there is a tendency to setup these networks to exclude other software. But the unintended consequence is that these networks become hostile to assistive technologies used by workers with disabilities. This is a serious trend and what that may have legal implications under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Anyone who has experienced such problems - please contact us so that we can gain some information regarding the extent of the problem.

Hewlett Packard PSC 2510 -
a wireless multifunction device

Wireless networking is all the rage. It has been a well-established option for internet access, but access to a printer and scanner was often best achieved my linking to another computer.

Wireless technology has great potential benefits to people with a disability, as it gives them greater flexibility in where the operate their equipment. It also abolishes the need to connect and disconnect cables - always a troublesome activity.

There is now a convenient multifunction device that has its own wireless capability. The built-in wireless (802.11b) and home networking supports up to five network users. It prints up to 1200 dpi black text up to 21 pages per minute and true-to-life images with up to 4800-optimized dpi colour, up to 15 pages per minute. It has a 2.5-inch colour image LCD and memory card slots to provide the option to perform a variety of functions without using a computer. It requires Windows 98, 98 SE, Me, 2000 Professional, XP; Mac OS 9.1 or later, OS X (Windows NT® 4.0, 95, 3.1, MS-DOS, Mac OS 9.0 and earlier are not supported). Available for $639 (rrp is $769).

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Links

Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) is a web based information source that provides up to date, accurate and comprehensive information about inclusive teaching, learning and assessment strategies, accommodations and support services for people with disabilities in post secondary education and training. Information includes:

- Frequently Asked Questions - succinct answers to the questions most commonly asked by teachers and practitioners

- Fact Sheets – summaries of current information on key topics

- Resources & Links - comprehensive database of articles, resources, research papers and links to related sites

- Partnerships and Practitioners - links to disability practitioners, researchers and partner organisations

- News and Events – the latest information from a variety of sources to keep users up to date

ADCET services are primarily targeted at teachers, disability practitioners, learning support staff and researchers. The database also includes information and resources that may be useful for students.

ADCET is working to encourage equitable access to post secondary education and training for people with disabilities through the following strategies:

- Gather, evaluate, and disseminate information and research relating to inclusive teaching, assessment & learning strategies, support services and related areas;

- Provide up to date news and information about changes to legislation, programmes, policies and practices; and

- Facilitate and promote professional development, information sharing and research, amongst disability practitioners, teachers and other professionals.

The ADCET project was funded under the Higher Education Innovation Programme of the Australian Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) and was launched on International Day for People with Disabilities on December 3 2003. Since then the user base has grown to over 700 and a recent evaluation has been overwhelmingly positive.   **www.adcet.edu.au**

Ability Services

Ability Support Packages

We've seen it time and time again...a computer is delivered to a person with a disability. The boxes are dumped at the door step. The person 'has' a computer. But can they use it? There are many areas where a person with a disability requires technical support regarding their computer system. Here is a brief description of some of the likely needs:

• **Setting Up** - it is clear than most people with disabilities will need assistance to set up their computer and peripherals. As well as unpacking the equipment, this process may include setting up an internet connection, loading drivers for various devices (some of which may need to be upgraded over the internet), and testing to make sure it all works. If the person has any special equipment, then these will need to be installed and integrated with the rest of the system. Warranty cards and serial numbers should be carefully located and stored safely.

• **Customising** - there can be many aspects to the customisation process. Unwanted icons may be removed and important shortcuts created on the desktop. The cursor speed may be adjusted. Special hardware and software often have options that can be tailored to the needs of the individual. This process may require more than one visit, as some trial and error may be involved.

• **Technical support** - technical issues can arise at any time, but are more prominent in the early months. They can involve hardware issues, software issues or the operating system. As these all involve different companies, to whom does the person (or their carers) turn?

It is much easier if one organisation takes responsibility for the whole system. This includes liaising with manufacturers and suppliers (we are well known to many of them). That is what an Ability Support Package does. In conjunction with our expert training services, the Support Packages take all of the headaches out of the process.

The **Ability Integration Package** operates at the beginning of the person's computer journey. It provides the above services, as well as expert training, for $99 per hour.

The **Ability Support Package** then takes over. It involves a points system - the points are used only as you need them. Support is provided via telephone, email or, if needed, through a personal visit. A package of 100 points costs $495.

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Comment

Of costs and hidden costs...

The more important computer assistive technology becomes for people with a disability, the more important that it be available fairly and efficiently in Australia. As nearly all of this technology is imported, this focuses attention on those who import and distribute these products.

Distribution processes vary considerably in Australia. In our experience, the way in which the distribution process takes place here is patchy. One problem is a lack of competition, which will always be a problem in our small market. Another problem is that some distributors represent products they know little about, so their capacity to offer advice and support is minimal. More, support for resellers (who often have the burden of identifying and applying the products to the needs of specific individuals) is extremely poor, in terms of demo stock, promotional material and referrals.

But a more obvious problem is **pricing**. There have been few price reductions among our suppliers in recent months, even though the dollar has risen from below US60c to US77c. Even apart from this, there are in some cases wide discrepancies in street prices here compared to the US. The following table shows some interesting comparisons:

PRODUCT	DISTRIBUTOR	LOCAL PRICE $A	US PRICE (in $A)
WiVik 3	Regency Park	$834	$455
Text Assist Read n Write Gld	Spectronics	$850	$838
AlphaSmart Dana	Spectronics	$815 ex GST	$492
Penny + Giles Roller Plus Joystick	Control Devices	$990	$513

Draw your own conclusions! Sure, these comparisons don't include the cost of shipping, but the variations are disturbing in three of the above cases.

But there is even more. Resellers vary enormously in the policies regarding **returns**. In the case of Spectronics, there is a 30 Day Money Back Guarantee. However, in the case of Regency Park there is a 15% "re-stocking fee": one of our customers was charged **$130** after returning an unopened copy of WiVik! Obviously we paid it on our customer's behalf). As the old saying goes, *caveat emptor* (buyer beware).

- Graeme Smith

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News

Southern Roadtrip
Details have now been finalised for our Southern Roadtrip. Free workshops will be held in Nowra (29 March), Batemans Bay (30 March), Merimbula (31 March) and Cooma (1 April). A brochure is available by email - send your enquiry to **info@ability.org.au**

Training Seminars
Places are filling fast for our Ability Training Days in assistive technology in 2004. The first is being held on **Wednesday 24 March 2004** and will cover home automation and computer access. The second will be held on **Wednesday 21 April 2004** (in the school holidays) and will cover special software, computer access and portable note-takers. Participants will receive notes and a CD of sample software and other information. Places are strictly limited, so those interested are advised to apply early. Additional courses will be run during the year - if these dates don't suit, then please register your interest for later courses.

Central West Roadtrip
Details are still being planned for a Roadtrip to the Central West of NSW, but this will be designed to link with the IDEAS Expo in Dubbo on 18-20 September. Please contact us if you want to register your interest in these free workshops.

Computers, Brain Injury and Employment
We are hoping to commence a new research project on the above topic in the near future. The pilot study will attempt to identify issues and prospects for modern technology to assist this group to obtain and retain employment.