

Ability Newsletter

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Welcome!

Welcome to the new format for the *Ability Newsletter*. We have been considering this change for a long time and we trust it will help us provide a better information service for our readers. We thank those hundreds of readers who have contacted us to endorse the new arrangements.

What will the new format mean for you? Here are some of the advantages we envisage for you:

- ♦ **More accessible information**
Because the *Newsletter* will be in computer format, you can resize it to your own comfort. If you prefer a printed format, you can simply print it out (in full colour, if you wish!)
- ♦ **More usable information**
Living hyperlinks will take you direct to Web sites. Graphics can be downloaded direct from the *Newsletter*.
- ♦ **More frequent information**
We will produce new *Newsletter* every month, instead of twice a year. The information you get will be more up-to-date.

There will be benefits for us as well. We will save the cost of printing and postage. These costs have risen substantially as the number of subscribers has increased. We can also produce the *Newsletter* more rapidly.

The *Newsletter* will be available from the Web. If you would like to receive a reminder e-mail, then just let us know: info@abilitycorp.com.au

Happy reading!

Speech recognition for the Macintosh

by Joel Cooper

“After speaking my first sentence I was pleasantly surprised that ViaVoice didn’t make a single mistake.”

ViaVoice - Mac

There is no denying what a difference voice recognition software has made in many people’s lives. Those who were unable to type had to resort to slower alternatives to get their ideas written, or even worse, they had to give it a miss altogether.

Up until now anyone requiring such software would be made to use a Windows computer. The only similar software on the Macintosh was aged discrete speech packages (users had to pause between words). The result was that many Macintosh people were forced to use an operating system that they didn’t like.

IBM claims that its new package, ViaVoice for Macintosh, puts an end to this. So how does ViaVoice compare to its Windows counterparts? Although on some criteria it has some catching up to do, it may just do the job!

Don’t expect to be able to run ViaVoice on any Macintosh less than a G3. It will run on any Macintosh released after the first iMac with at least 48 Mb RAM (although we highly recommend using at least 128 Mb). Everything else you need is included in the box, including the software CD, headset microphone, command reference card and manual.

I found installation easy enough using the manual, although ViaVoice did conflict with a 3rd party shareware extension that I had to disable. After doing so, I was able to get up and running in about 45 minutes. In voice recognition terms this is about average.

The first step was connecting and placing the microphone headset over my head. The microphone was comfortable and matched my blueberry iMac to a tee thanks to the variety of coloured add-on plates.

Next up was running the *Audio Wizard*. This was an automated process of setting up the Mac’s audio and microphone settings to optimum levels and went without a hitch. The most important step was then to “enrol” my voice. This was an intensive learning process of the computer hearing me speak a variety of paragraphs. Although drawn out and tedious, this was easy enough.

It was now possible to actually use the software to dictate some sentences. This unfortunately could not be done in my favourite word processor and instead I had to use the program’s built-in word processor. The theory of this is that you dictate your document and then cut and paste it into your word processor for formatting touch-ups, making it hard for hands free use. (continued over)

A simplified e-mail program for Windows

eeZee Mail

EeZee mail is a recent e-mail program for Windows 95/98 that takes much of the complexity out of sending and receiving emails. The program uses a colourful simplified display, which shows only the essentials needed to send & receive emails. The main page uses a three step guide to writing and receiving emails, with each step containing all the instructions needed. The procedure is as simple as:

Step One: write your letter

Step Two: choose someone from your e-mail address list to send to

Step Three: send the e-mail

Other options such as "check for new mail" are displayed with an appropriate picture next to them, providing extra visual prompting. Security features within the program also allow incoming emails to be restricted according to your address book, so you can stop all undesirable emails from unknown parties.

EeZee email is much simpler and more intuitive than traditional email programs, giving much easier access to email facilities. EeZee email is a shareware program, which is able to be trialed free for a period of 30 days. After this time you must pay for the product via the internet or fax. The program at present costs \$29.95 US to register.

Speech recognition for the Macintosh

Continued

After speaking my first sentence I was pleasantly surprised that ViaVoice didn't make a single mistake. The next couple of sentences also had a very high accuracy rate. However, even using the proper correction procedures, the more I read the greater number of mistakes it seemed to make. In contrast, Dragon Naturally Speaking for Windows (DNS) was a little inaccurate at first but improved quickly. After dictation for a couple of hours, the accuracy rate got to about 96%. DNS got about 98%.

ViaVoice's built-in vocabulary was on-par with DNS's standard of 250,000, and was easily enough for a general writing style. Any words it didn't know were added with ease and mistakes were quick to correct. Like DNS, whole previously written documents can be analysed for the software to get used to your writing style.

So although in the Windows market there are better voice recognition packages, at the end of the day ViaVoice for the Macintosh is still a good product. It is high enough quality for most people who have used Macs in the past to be able to continue using Macs. And with updates planned for the future, ViaVoice may just catch up to its Windows version (Via Voice Millennium Edition for Windows). On the other hand, some users may wish to wait for Dragon Naturally Speaking for Macintosh, said to be released sometime this year.

To read more about ViaVoice for the Macintosh go to IBM's official web site: <http://www-4.ibm.com/software/speech/mac/>

A cost effective ergonomic keyboard

Goldtouch Adjustable Keyboard

With the Cherry Ergonomic Keyboard being discontinued, there has been a lack of a reasonably priced ergonomic keyboard on the market. This is why we were pleased to find a new product to fill the gap.

The Goldtouch Adjustable Keyboard allows you to adjust the two alphanumeric sections both horizontally and vertically to suit your individual body requirements. This helps you to assume a more natural posture that is conducive to improving comfort and productivity while using your computer.

Features include: adjustment for wrist splay in the horizontal plane: 0-30 degrees, continuously variable; adjustment for wrist pronation - vertical tenting 0-30 degrees, continually variable and an easily adjusted, locking ball and socket latch mechanism.

At a price of \$175, the Goldtouch represents great value. A separate numeric pad is available, along with a gel-based wrist rest.



Sensible device and cable management

Xircom Port Station

Assessing different computer input devices for people with special needs usually involves testing a number of alternatives. At present some of the available devices use the standard serial port, others use the PS/2 port, some use the keyboard port while others use the new USB connection. Demonstrating different options can involve a lot of rebooting of the computer while devices are changed. Not to mention the problem of reaching over to the back of the computer (typically situated in a dark corner) to change connectors, and the eventual inevitable damage to pins on the connectors.

The Xircom Port Station goes a long way to overcoming these problems. The device connects to a single USB port on the computer. It makes available the number of other ports, including USB, keyboard and PS/2. Serial port connections can be added to the basic unit because of its modular design.

In the not too distant future we envisage that most input devices will be available with a USB option. Until then we consider the Xircom Port Station to be an essential tool in our assessment work. We also consider it to be a useful device for people with many peripheral devices attached to the computer and to wish to be able to connect these devices from the front rather than the rear of the computer.

Changes at Ability

There have been substantial changes at Ability since our last (printed) Newsletter. We believe these changes will give our work a firm basis for future growth. Let me take you through these one by one:

Not-for-profit structure

Ability has a new structure. Over the first half of 2000 Ability has changed from a private company to a new not-for-profit company. Why have we done this? The main reasons are to give us greater access to research funding and greater fluency within the disability sector. In many ways Ability has always conducted its work in a charitable way, doing many services without charge. But we have also performed our work with professionalism and with an attentiveness to the needs of our clients (because our viability depends on pleasing our customers, rather than pleasing those who give disability funding). These features of our work will not change in the new structure.

New name

The new company has a new name: **Ability Technology**. The trading names of "Ability Research Centre", "Ability Computer Services" and "Input Options" all continue, but are all owned by the new company.

New locations

Ability now has a variety of locations for its work. Much of our assessment work takes place in people's homes or workplaces. We prefer this because it enables us to get more relevant information about our clients, thus making for better assessments. But we still have our assessment centre at **Ryde**. In addition we have an assessment venue in **Melbourne** and a new location in **Seaforth** (which will also soon offer assessments in the area of environmental control systems). Other venues in the pipeline include **Newcastle** and **Sydney city**. We can also offer assessments via videoconference!

We have consolidated our administration and staff base at the Seaforth office.



Continued on next page

Staff changes

...Changes at Ability

We bid farewell to **Joel Cooper**, who has given us several years of dedicated and professional service in the areas of technical support and training. Those who dealt with Joel will certainly remember him as helpful and knowledgeable. Joel is currently travelling around Australia with a friend. We hope to be able to utilise his talents on a casual basis for clients in the central coast when he returns.

We welcome **Michael Berryman** to Ability. Michael is an occupational therapist who also brings with him very useful computer skills. He has settled in well to the work and is making a substantial contribution to Ability.

Mike Spivak has been undertaking a stint with Ability in the areas of training, research and Web management. Unfortunately this can only continue until the end of the year, as Michael and his wife are moving to Wollongong. But we may be able to use his training and technical skills for clients in the Illawarra region.

Other staff continue: **Alan Bimson** (Product Coordinator), **Shannon Schmidt** (Finance), **Lesley White** (Information) and myself, **Graeme Smith** (everything else!).

We have a great team of people. The last six months or so have not been easy, with all of our own restructuring together with the changes imposed by the Government (the GST). But we have made it through! My thanks to all of them. And also to all of you, who honour us by using our services in growing numbers.

Best wishes

Graeme Smith