

Ability Newsletter

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What Profit Profit?

The role of the private sector in assistive technology

There are only two types of organizations in the disability sector. There are the goodies – not for profit (NFP) organizations legitimised by government funding. And there are the baddies – greedy private companies who relentlessly pursue profit. That's the folklore and an attitude that is surprisingly persistent in the disability field.

The irony is that NFPs now have to generate much of their own income and behave often like private companies. And virtually all of the private companies that have lasted in the assistive technology field undertake a surprising amount of work for free or small cost. The divisions are blurring.

Ability has had experience on both sides of the fence. We began as a private company. This aroused suspicion in some people. But we believed (and still do) that there is value in having to win your customers through better service, compared with having clients captive to a funded program. The spark to innovate, to do things better, is very powerful when you've backed yourself with the family home!

We chose to start off as a private company because we wanted the freedom to be creative in a rapidly changing environment. Government funding can be fickle, as most organizations dependent on such income have found out. It also takes a large chunk of your time and resources, applying for funding, monitoring funding, reporting on funding, and so on.

So why did we change to a not for profit organization? The main reason was to increase our prospects for obtaining funding for research and other projects. Private companies, unfortunately, are excluded from such funding. But we still generate our own income, unlike most other NFPs. The change has been a cautious one for us. Not for Profit still has the connotation of "inefficient", "poorly managed" and "unprofessional" in many people's eyes – although this too is surely a stereotype, just like the greedy private sector company.

Maybe it is time to measure all organizations in the disability field with the same measuring stick. We need to evaluate them according to what they do and the way they do it, rather than according to outmoded stereotypes. And my view is that competition, rather than bureaucratic rules, is the best way to improve assistive technology services in Australia.

- Graeme Smith

Product News

Datalux



The Datalux keyboard has a compact design but with a number of interesting features. For example, it has the full 100 keys. This includes a numeric pad and the full 12 function keys.

Another good feature is the heavy base. It is more resistant to bumps and knocks than other compact keyboards.

Finally the Datalux has a curved shape that means the keys will be similar distance from the user. This can be an advantage for those who type with a mouthstick or head pointer.

The Desktop model (shown) weighs 1.0kg and measures 10.8"W x 6.10"L x 2.55"H. A flat model is available and also one with a built-in Glidepoint touch pad.

The Desktop model (black) is available from Input Options for \$275.

Everyone has a computer now - don't they?

The latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that 53% of households now have a computer. 33% have access to the Internet. As one would expect, these figures are rising at a steady rate. However computer ownership and access is not spread evenly in our society. There are wide variations in computer ownership. Here are some of the factors that determine your likelihood of having a computer at home:

INCOME

85% of households with high incomes (\$100,000 or more) have a computer, whereas only 24% of households with low incomes (\$0-\$24,999) are likely to have a computer.

AGE

Only 12% of individuals 65 or over use a computer at home. This compares with 59% for those 18-24.

EDUCATION

74% of those with a university degree use a computer at home, compared with only 35% for those whose highest education is secondary school.

EMPLOYMENT

57% of those who are employed use a computer at home, compared with only 27% of those who are not employed.

FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

72% of households with children under 18 have a computer. Only 26% of single person households have a computer at home.

LOCATION

There is still a gap between households in metropolitan areas (56% with a computer) and other households (48% with a computer), but this gap has narrowed considerably.

For those on the 'downside' of these variables, computer access is limited. This would include many people with disabilities. It seems we have a clear divide in our society between the information rich and information poor.

Product News

Ergoport

The Ergoport is a contoured desk overlay that is designed to improve posture and comfort while you are using a computer. It is an Australian product that "will help to prevent back pain, neck and shoulder strain". Studies by the School of Exercise and Sport Science at the University of Sydney indicate that the Ergoport reduced upper body muscular stress compared with a workstation set up according to Worksafe guidelines.

To use the Ergoport you need an adjustable height chair without arms. You push into the cut-out section of the unit and rest your elbows into the pads on either side. The intention is to make you keep your arms level, from your elbow to your hand pads.

How does it work in practice? As with many aspects of ergonomics, personal responses vary. Two of our staff tested the Ergoport for a few days each. Our conclusions were similar:

- The Ergoport does promote a better posture. It virtually forces you not to hunch over your desk. You notice this especially when you are at rest, between tasks. There is less strain on the neck, shoulders and arms.
- We were not so sure about the effect of the Ergoport on the wrists. Keeping the elbows fixed seemed to result in greater reliance on the wrists when using the keyboard.
- On the practical side, the Ergoport dominates your desk (although a new smaller and lighter model - the EP5 - is due out this week). If you need to use books, journals, write notes and other activities on your desk, you may find the Ergoport intrusive. There is an accessory called the WorkPort - a perspex cover for the keyboard - that helps overcome this problem. It also doubles as a document stand.



The Ergoport is an innovative and thoughtful product. There is no doubt for certain people it will provide clear cut benefits. Others may not find it suitable. It sells for around \$297.

A free trial is available of the Ergoport for corporate clients.
Visit their web site: www.ergoport.com.au

Ability News

AccessAbility Workshop

Various people associated with projects funded under the AccessAbility program met for a workshop in Canberra on 14-15 May. Graeme Smith represented Ability for what turned out to be a very enjoyable experience. It is always great to hear about the variety of interesting research projects being undertaken around the country in the area of assistive technology. We only hope that resources will be provided to enable further research projects to be undertaken.

Belkin DockStation

We have been recently testing the Belkin DockStation. This is a great device that enables one USB port on your computer to support 4 USB devices, 2 PS/2 devices, one serial device and one printer. Even better, the devices can be hot swapped - you don't need to reboot your computer. It is a must for assessment centres. It sells for \$295 from Ability.

Inexpensive environmental control options

Our next Newsletter will feature some very interesting findings from recent testing we have done on environmental control options. We will report on a portable voice-controlled unit that sells for less than \$1200, as well as a computer-based ECU that can be controlled by voice through a remote microphone.

We have begun to provide environmental control assessments for clients. These look at the infrastructure requirements, along with the controlling device options. Ability will not be selling the specialised controlling systems, thus preserving our independence in this area.

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