# *Ability Newsletter*

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### *Product and Service News*

## eMac

### *Apple gets it right*

There is something compelling about one-piece Macintosh computers.  It is more than nostalgia, for those of us who remember with fondness the earliest Mac computers.  It makes the computer more personal, gives it greater identity, as well as making transportation a possibility.

The iMac has been a great success for Apple, but the eMac does it a bit better.  It has a Combo drive (CD-RW and DVD), 17″ flat display, modem, a PowerPC G4 processor, USB and Firewire ports, Ethernet and great software (AppleWorks, iMovie, iPhoto and iTunes.

The basic model has all of this for $2295.  Higher models have faster processors and a SuperDrive (CD-RW and DVD-R).  But they cost more.  The basic model is the bargain of the range.  The swivel stand (an optional extra) may be well worthwhile.  The base model also only comes with 128 Mb RAM, which looks a little skinny in the modern world.

# *Acoustic Magic Voice Tracker*
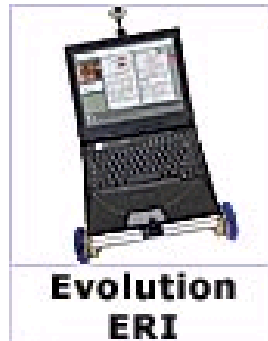
## *Desktop Microphone*

Desktop microphones allow greater independence to people who are unable to affix or remove a headset microphone. However in the past the lower accuracy of such devices has meant the user has had to choose between convenience and performance. Newer "array" microphones utilise the latest technology to filter and interpret sound more cleanly. The results in our testing were impressive. We found accuracy similar to a headset microphone.

The Acoustic Magic device has some interesting features. The Field Switch allows the user to set the scanning angle to 45 degrees or 90 degrees. The LDS Switch will enable the device to ignore sound from outside the selected area. If the user moves across the field of view of the array, the lights on the device will track the talker's position.

The Voice Tracker Array sells for $595. This is quite high, but well worth the investment for those who would gain precious independence from such a device.

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# ER1 Personal Robot System



Evolution
ER1

The promise of things to come?   Just add a notebook computer and away you go! The Robot Control centre software allows you to set up If-Then conditions and actions based on sight (through a camera), sound, colour, time and message received.  It can be trained to avoid obstacles, take movies, run programs, play music and speak out loud.  With the optional gripper arm, it can apparently be trained to handle items.

*Gripper arm*



# CD Tower

For those who are unable to handle CDs independently, there are considerable frustrations and limitations when it comes to using a number of different CDs.  The old multiplay CDs (such as the Pioneer DRM Autochanger) are now very hard to get. But the principle was sound - allowing multiple CDs to be pre-loaded and then accessed when required by the user.

An alternative is to use a tower of multiple CD drives. These are designed for commercial use, but have application for people with special needs.  One example is the **Verbatim 7 Drive IDEPlex**.  This is a SCSI device that controls 7 IDE drives, guided by a RISC processor.

The cost is $2,200, which is a bit more than the old Pioneer.  But it will be much, much faster.

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# An Historic Opportunity

## Speech from the Opening of Ability House, Oct 18

12 years ago I walked into the Spastic Centre as a consultant and was confronted with the indelible image of 200 people with cerebral palsy doing packaging work. I knew there had to be something better for these people, (many of whom I've come to know and worked with since that time), and I suspected that emerging computer technology would have something to do with it. That moment was really the birth of Ability and the work that has followed.

The PC has changed the world in the short time since 1990. Most people now use computers in their work. There has been a revolution that continues to leave us breathless.

Yet there has been another revolution that has shadowed the main computer revolution. We have seen the emergence of thousands of adaptations that enable people with all types of disabilities to access computers. We should not let the historic nature of such a change pass us by. What these changes mean is this:

For the first time in history, many people with disabilities can, through assistive computer technology, be INDEPENDENT and PRODUCTIVE. Through computer-related technology, people with disabilities can SPEAK, WRITE, STUDY, BE CREATIVE, READ, MANAGE THEIR APPOINTMENTS, DO THEIR SHOPPING, PAY THEIR BILLS, CONTROL ASPECTS OF THEIR HOME ENVIRONMENT, BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, ENJOY RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES, BE EMPLOYED. It enables them to express themselves, participate, and contribute to society.

Unfortunately governments in Australia have not seen the vision that many of us have seen. They couldn't have, otherwise we would have policies that seize this historic opportunity. While the USA has had visionary legislation in this areas for nearly 15 years (most recently in the Assistive Technology Act of 1998), we have basically ignored the issue. Technology is not even part of the Commonwealth-State Disability Agreement, not even on the political agenda.

In education, only a trickle of funding is provided for assistive computer technology for kids. In this process more is spent on ensuring the legitimacy of requests for technology than on the technology itself. We hear complaints from one end of the State to the other. Studies tell us that educational achievements shape the future vocational outcomes of kids with disabilities. Where are the policies?

In the area of employment it is little better. Employers don't know where to get advice on

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# Opening Speech *continued…*

special equipment, even if they knew special equipment existed.  Job placement agencies likewise have minimal knowledge of new technology.

Those with intellectual disability and cognitive disability form the largest employment headache for the government.  There are a dwindling number of basic manual jobs available.  Numbers on the Disability Support Pension are growing.  Shouldn't we be exploring ways of linking people with cognitive disabilities to computer technology?

*Why don't we have policies that seize this historic opportunity?*
*Why don't we have the simple research that will guide policy?*
*Why can't what we do here be done on larger scale?*

Let me make one important point before closing.  I am not advocating a new welfare cost.  The policies that I am proposing in this area do not involve an extra welfare burden.  This should not be seen as a welfare issue.  It is an economic issue.  We are talking about an investment.  There are clear returns available to the economy, apart from any justice issues:

* Reduced pension outlays.  Each person with a disability who is employed saves the government heaps.

* Public liability insurance costs would be automatically reduced if people with disabilities were employable.

* We are concerned about future labour force shortages yet we have an army of people with disabilities who just need the tools to be productive members of the workforce.  They want to be taxpayers!

I am talking about a vision that makes economic sense, something that will add to the economy and not be a drain from it.

12 years ago I had a vision for change.  Part of that vision took place when one person - Leigh Lockrey - asked me to help him get a computer with some special bits.  He was the first person with a disability that I helped use a computer.  A few months later Leigh told me that the computer had changed his life.  That stunned me, but also inspired me.  I have assisted over 500 people since that time, and seen many lives changed, but I have never forgotten that moment when Leigh spoke those words to me.

So who better to officially open Ability House than Leigh Lockrey… (Leigh proceeded to cut the ribbon with a huge smile on his face!)

*– Graeme Smith*

# News

### Road Trip ... North - More to come!

Graeme Smith travelled 1700 kilometres through some pretty dry areas during an Ability Roadtrip at the end of October. Free information workshops were conducted at Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour, Grafton and Tamworth. Over 100 people attended these workshops, to see and hear about the latest trends in assistive technology. Some assessments were conducted during the trip.

We plan further road trips, to other areas of NSW (and beyond, if requested). So if you are in a rural community and would like the Ability Roadtrip to head in your direction, then contact the Ability office to discuss the issue.

### Training Day - October 23 - More to come!

Our first Ability Training Day was conducted successfully at Ability House on 23 October. The morning session looked at Home Automation technology, while the afternoon session examined Speech Recognition. These training sessions are designed for people with disabilities and those who work with them. There are a maximum number of four participants in each session, so everyone gets individual attention and plenty of scope to trial the technology themselves. Several bookings have already been taken for the next training day, probably to be held in February 2003. Please contact the Ability office if you would like to be placed on the waiting list.

### Official Opening of Ability House - October 18

Guests from a variety of disability organisations were joined by Tony Abbott, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, Brad Hazzard, Shadow Minister for Community Services, David Barr, our local independent State MP, and Jean Hay, Mayor of Manly. We were encouraged by this show of support. Everyone seemed to enjoy the informal atmosphere and positive tone to the afternoon. The act of opening the building however fell to Leigh Lockrey, who burst through the ribbons in his motorised wheelchair with a smile as big as the Harbour Bridge! An summary version of the opening speech by Graeme Smith is shown elsewhere in this Newsletter.

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