Ability Newsletter

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Comfort Keyboard - Left and Right Hand

There are many interesting features found in the **A4Tech Full Comfort keyboards**. The first and most noticeable feature is the placement of the numeric pad on the left side of the keyboard (right hand versions are also available). The aim is to allow the mouse to be brought in closer to the main keyboard on the right side, although left-handed users may like this layout for other reasons.

But there are more features. The keys have A4Tech's patented "A-Shape": the keys slope in towards the centre, thus allowing a more natural placement of the hands on the keys. A very simple but effective innovation. There are also 19 programmable hotkeys, as well as a matching mouse (800dpi). And I almost format to mention - both devices are wireless RF.

Pricing? A modest $88 including GST. Available now from Ability.

Computer Input

The Wombat - new small keyboard

While the *Cherry Compact* is our most popular smaller keyboard, with the *BTC* offering an alternative, we now include another small keyboard in our range. The **Wombat** is available in standard form or with a trackball (as shown) for a small additional cost.

The standard model costs $119 inc while the model with a built-in trackball costs $139 inc. A wireless model with a built-in trackball is also available for $199. Available now from Ability.

Kinesis Evolution Keyboard

There are occasions when a keyboard that can split into two widely separately halves is an advantage. The **Kinesis Evolution Desktop Keyboard** is unique in that a separation of over 20" is possible. Three configurations are available: Chair Arm Mount, Track Mount and Desktop. The keyboard offers a wide range of adjustability, in lateral slope, forward tilt and rotation, as well as unlimited key remapping (with no software or drivers required). Models are available with an integrated *Cirque* touchpad (or two, in the dual touchpad model).

Prices in the US are $289 with no touchpad, $329 with either left or right touchpad and $379 with dual touchpads.

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Computer Input

Andrea Superbeam Array Microphone

Desktop microphones have always had the potential to facilitate speech recognition for those who are unable to manipulate a headset. However the trade off in terms of accuracy was too high, until recently. The *Acoustic Magic Voice Tracker Array* microphone helped overcome this problem. Array microphones have a number of microphone receptors in the one unit, with a system of processing the sound signals and "cleaning" them up for speech recognition. The *Acoustic Magic* does this processing in the microphone itself, with the result that the unit is quite large and expensive. The **Andrea** is much smaller. Its processing is done through software you install on your computer. This also keeps the cost down. But what about performance?

We have found the **Andrea** to be as good as the *Acoustic Magic*. It also seems to work better for a wider range of individuals. Its size makes it more versatile and convenient to use. The cost is around $200.

AlphaSmart with Voice

AlphaSmart and Don Johnston Inc. have just announced the release of a version of Write:Out Loud (called **Write:Out Loud To Go**) for the AlphaSmart Dana notetaker. To enable audio output onthe Dana will require the new **AlphaSmart VoiceCard**. The new software and hardware will be available from 1 November 2004 in the USA.

Pricing and local availability have yet to be announced.

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Phones

SOS Emergency Telephone

This phone has a number of features to enable emergency contact via the phone line. When the alarm is activated (by pressing the large red "Emergency" button, or the remote answering pendant or by a switch linked to the pendant) the phone will call the first pre-programmed number. If that does not answer, the second pre-programmed number will be rung, and finally a third number. If this is not answered the whole process will be repeated three times. When the call is answered a pre-recorded emergency message is played. The answerer cancels the alarm and is then able to monitor the background noise or activity at the source.

The **SOS Phone** is available from Technical Solutions (www.tecsol.com.au) for $275. They also make the switch-adapted remote pendant, for an additional $50.

Using your Computer as a Telephone

We have recently been testing two computer telephone solutions. The first is to install a **Voice modem** either as a card in your desktop or as an external device. These devices enable a microphone and speakers to be connected to the modem. Telephone facilities are then controlled through computer software. This enables you to use whatever controlling devices you have on your computer to operate your phone. The software that came with our internal modem didn't seem to generate enough microphone volume, even with a powered microphone. We will test other software in the coming months. The cost of calls is whatever you normally pay with your carrier.

The second option we have tested is using broadband Internet (called **VoIP**) for telephony. This involves getting an account and phone number with a provider, and downloading computer phone software. Calls are outward only at this stage (but this will change very soon) and travel via the Internet and the receiver's local phone service. Quality is very good most of the time. Delays and drop outs do occur. But the cost is very very low: at Freshtel for example, there are no connection fees and calls are charged by the second. To local, interstate and many international numbers the rate is 6.9c per minute (to local mobiles is 30c/min). This is definitely the way of the future for telephony. Expect to see a flurry of competing products available soon. However as you use your computer's speakers and microphone for calls, it will be more complex to use VoIP in conjunction with say speech recognition.

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Home control

Autoslide

Autoslide is an automatic door system that attaches to new and existing patio sliding doors. It was featured recently on The New Inventors (ABC TV). It is a DIY device comprising a motor and motion sensor mats on either side of the door. The motor can be fitted to either the top or bottom of the door. Installation is estimated at 15 minutes.

Autoslide has a battery and a battery charger, so that it works even after a power failure. It automatically slides closed after a pre-programmed time delay. A lever returns the door to manual control.

The cost is $495. It is available from Mark Hancock at www.autodoors.com.au

Home Theatre Master MX-3000

We are very keen to find portable, wireless, touch-screen remote control option for our clients. The task of finding and testing such devices is difficult. The MX-3000, which we haven't tested, is an indication of the direction in which we are looking. It has a 3.8" colour touch screen, RF operation up to 50-100 feet, automatic backlighting when touched, USB link to a computer for downloading codes and programs, and extensive macro and customising options. It comes pre-programmed with over 1,500 A/V codes but it can also learn up to 780 functions from existing remotes (presumably including X-10 codes trained through a device such as the Marmitek 8-in-1). An optional RF Receiver with 6 IR flashers (MRF-250) is available. Dimensions are 7.0" x 4.75" x 1.1". It weighs 8 oz. with batteries. The MX-3000 sells for $1,000 US, while the MRF-250 is $100 US.

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Software

Voyager Discovery Desktop

Remember *At Ease* simplified interface for the Macintosh in years gone by? And *KidDesk* for Windows? These programs performed two important functions - they gave simple program choices, devoid of the clutter and confusion in modern operating systems, and they prevented a user from getting into the system settings and causing havoc. The **Voyager Desktop** from Ablelink Technolgies has the same advantages. It provides "a simplified, customizable interface for users with special cognitive needs". Large, single-click buttons can be customised to launch any program installed on the computer. It is available as a Personal or Multi-User edition. It is also available as part of a suite, including simplified web browser and email programs. The cost for the Discovery Desktop is $250, while the Suite is around $700.

TextAloud 2.0

It just gets better and better. In the new version adjustments to volume and pitch can be done via a slide control while text is being read out; it can directly open RTF, Word, PDF and HTML files; voices can be changed within a single article; it has special proofreading options and a new customisable interface. Ridiculously good value at US $29.95 from www.nextup.com

TextAloud is a great way of utilising your computer as a reading device. Text from anywhere can be read aloud in very good quality synthesisied speech. It is also a great way of reviewing and proofreading what you have written. Many people find it easier to detect errors in their writing when they listen to what is written rather than just reading it.

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PDA

Pocket Coach

Palm and Pocket PC devices are increasingly being used to assist people with brain injury and cognitive impairments to better manage their lives. These devices are portable, quite intuitive to use and have features such as alarms to remind people of events, medication requirements and other similar activities.
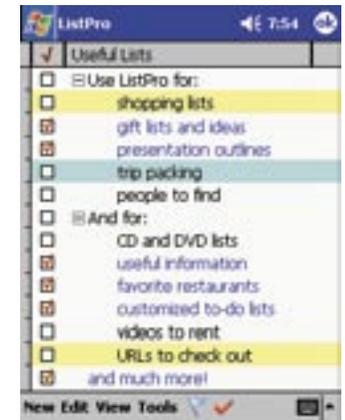
But they can do more. **Pocket Coach** enables a support person, employer or other individual to record a series of messages, prompts or task instructions for the user. The user can play back the messages in sequence or as a verbal to-do list. The system offers two modes of operation: PLAY mode to hear each message in sequence, or PLAY/DONE mode where the user must press a "Done" button after each step before they can move to the next step. Feedback messages can be recorded for positive reinforcement. The **Pocket Coach** could be very useful in employment situations to record task instructions, or in many daily activities where tasks need to be sequenced. Unlike a list program, **Pocket Coach** allows one task at a time to be highlighted and spoken aloud.

Pocket Coach costs $US299 for the software or as a complete unit with a Pocket PC for $US699. Australian prices are being acsertained.

ListPro

ListPro does what it does very well - create lists. It offers extensive customisation, columns with autodate, yes/no and categories, check functions, alarms, highlights, folders, filters, flags and much more. It is available for Windows PC, Pocket PC, Palm or Windows SmartPhone. For a single device the cost is $US19.95 and for the Professional Edition (to run on your Windows PC and one portable device, with synchronisation between them) the cost is $US29.95. A 30 day trial version is also available, from www.iliumsoft.com

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Auggie - Standard, Super and Mini

RJ Cooper has released three communication devices that seems well placed in what tends to be a very expensive market.

The **Super-Auggie** is based on a "slate PC" with a 12.1" touch screen running Windows XP Home. It has 256 Mb RAM, 1 GHz processor, and a 20GB hard drive. It runs 3rd party speech software such as *BoardMaker w/Speaking Dynamically Pro*. It has an external speaker, velcroed to the side, powered from a USB port, as well as WiFi, Ethernet and 56k modem. It weighs 2.2 kg and has a battery life of around 4 hours. It comes with a rugged leather case, a stand and an external CD/DVD drive, powered through a USB port. It requires a switch interface (such as RJ's *Switch Hopper*) or else a USB switch (such as the *Mini-Click* or the *Switch-Click*). The cost is US $2995.

The **Auggie** is based on a "mini-slate PC" with an 8.4" touch screen running Windows XP Home. It has 256 Mb RAM, 1 GHz processor, and a 30GB hard drive. It runs 3rd party speech software such as *BoardMaker w/Speaking Dynamically Pro*. It has an external speaker, velcroed to the side, powered from a USB port, as well as WiFi, Ethernet and 56k modem. It weighs 1.55 kg and has a battery life of 3-5 hours. It comes with a rugged leather case, a stand and an external CD/DVD drive, powered through a USB port. It requires a switch interface (such as RJ's *Switch Hopper*) or else a USB switch (such as the *Mini-Click* or the *Switch-Click*). The cost is US $1995.

The **Mini-Auggie** is based on a touch-sensitive Pocket PC (Dell X30). It comes with some new software: *Point To Pictures - Mobile*. The Mayer-Johnson PCS library is included on an SD card. It has a rugged case that also houses the speaker. It weighs 550 gms and battery life is described as "all day". An unlimited number of pages with up to 25 pictures per page can be stored and retrieved. It also has a program called *Remind Me:PPC.* When an alarm goes off, a picture is displayed along with a voice file reminder. When the screen is touched, a sequence of pictures/voice files plays to guide the user through the activity. The cost is US $799.

AAC Options

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Data on disability

Latest Data from ABS

Household Use of Information Technology

Data released in September 2004 has information on the use of computers by people with a disability (without, strangely, any comparative data on the whole population) in 2003. *Household Use of Information Technology 8146.0* showed that 48% of people with a disability used a computer, but only 36% of those with profound limitations used a computer any time during the year. Only 39% of people with a disability used the Internet, dropping to 28% for those with profound limitations.

Employment sems a significant factor in computer use by people with a disability - 78% of those with a disability who were employed used a computer, compared with only 33% of those who were not employed. Equivalent figures for internet use were 68% for those employed and 25% for those who were not employed. The extent to which these figures represent a major injustice is not known, due to the lack of information on the whole population.

Disability, Ageing and Carers

This data, for 2003, was also released in September 2004 (ABS 4430.0). It shows that 20% of the population has a disability. This group continues to be significantly disadvantaged in education, employment, income and community participation. They are also seemingly invisible to policy-makers, as evidenced by the fact that they were completely overlooked duirng our recent election spending spree. It is not a pretty picture.

Some snippets from the figures (the figures in brackets are for those without a disability):

* Only 11.6% of those 15-64 who have a disability that causes specific limitations/restrictions have a bachelors degree *(19.7%)*. Only 26.9% attained Year 12 at school *(49.3%)*.

* 48.4% of this group rely on a government pension or allowance as their primary source of income *(13.6%)*, while 29.9% rely on wage or salary income *(62.5%)*. Median gross personal income per week was $255 *($501)*.

* Labour force participation rate for this group was 47.7% *(80.6%)* and once in the labour force, their unemployment rate was 9.9% *(5.0%)*.

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Ability News

Research News

We are currently involved in a research project, to explore ways in which computer adaptations can assist people with brain injury to gain or retain employment. Funded by the Motor Accidents Authority of NSW, this pilot study is being conducted in conjunction with several job placement agencies in Sydney. It will be completed in mid-2005.

Training Seminars

Our recent Training Seminars in October were well-attended. Topics covered included Computer Access (Text Entry and Mouse Functions) and Environmental Control Systems. We will offer the Seminars again in March/April 2005. Places are strictly limited, so if you are interested, please contact us sooner rather than later.

On-Line Training

We are developing training material that will enable us to offer training courses to people throughout Australia. This will be achieved with the latest in technology, enabling people to undertake the study from their own location. Please let us know if you may be interested in this option.

Forthcoming trips

Graeme is scheduled to travel to Perth in late January/early February. Other forthcoming trips include the North Coast/New England and the South Coast/Southern Highlands, but dates have yet to be set for these roadtrips.

If you live in a country area, we invite you to contact us if you would be interested in attending a workshop, having an assessment or receiving training. We can then factor in your request as we plan our trips.