

Ability Newsletter

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Palm power

Power in the palm of your hand

The Palm Pilot is not new, but its usefulness keeps expanding. For those who have not experienced the Palm, it comes with an address book, diary, memo and to-do list. These are powerful yet intuitive applications, customisable to the needs of the user.

Each Palm comes with Windows or Mac software and a connection cradle. You can synchronise ('Hot Sync') all the information between your computer and the Palm with the press of a button. This is extra insurance in case of loss, theft or damage. Battery life is legendary (a few months) or, in the case of the colour model, 2 weeks.

There is a role for the Palm for people with special needs. Let's look at some examples:

Notetaker

Several keyboards (including one that folds up) are available for the Palm. This means the device can function as a very convenient notetaker. Easy transfer of text to Word after a Hot Sync is an especially welcome feature.



Product News

Reminder System

An electronic organiser like the Palm has many advantages for people with memory problems. It allows events to be changed without crossing out and scribbling over. It allows recurring events to be entered just once. Most importantly, it allows an alarm to be set to remind people of events.

Information Organiser

Sometimes people with cognitive impairments have difficulty recalling and structuring ideas. One client finds she cannot recall current affairs information when she is involved in conversations with her friends. This causes her frustration. The Palm Pilot can assist in such cases. The availability of FileMaker Pro for the Palm enhances the possible role of this device for organising and retrieving information.

Digital Camera

Kodak makes a small digital camera that clips onto the Palm. The Palm screen becomes a rough viewfinder window. The JPEG images are transferred back to your computer at the next Hot Sync. It costs about \$130.

The Pilot is a great device. Palm support is also excellent. The colour model (shown) is now selling for a little over \$600, while the monochrome models start at under \$300.

SMS from your PC

It is possible to send SMS messages (up to 140 characters) from your PC direct to a mobile phone. This will provide a very useful communication system for people who spend a lot of time at their PC, without the inconvenience of pressing those tiny buttons on your mobile phone. Be warned however that hidden cost of some of these services is to receive advertising on your mobile - a real pest!

Look at www.mobilealert.com.au and blueskyfrog.com.au for examples.

Products

Link

Portable keyboard-based communication device

The Link is a portable communication aid, based on the shape of the original Alphasmart 1000 note taker. It has a laptop-sized keyboard, with a row of smaller function keys along the top. The Link allows typed messages to be spoken out, as well as having a number of shortcuts that the user can store. The display on the Link is very similar to other Alphasmarts, with a green monochrome display capable of showing four lines of text at a time. The Link is able to store up to 64 pages of text, which can be transferred to a PC or Mac via a cable. When plugged into a computer, it functions as a normal keyboard.

The speech output from the device is quite reasonable, using the DECTalk speech output synthesiser. The unit also allows user to change pitch and speech rates when needed. A variety of male and female voices can be used.

Compared to a laptop-based communication system such as Windbag, the Link is far more basic. The Link has no multiple banks of stored words, no word completion, and a smaller screen, which can be a little difficult to see in poor light conditions. The Link is however far lighter than the average notebook computer, so is much more easily positioned on the lap. The Link would also be a good choice for those in a more rough and tumble environment such as the schoolyard.

Overall the Link fulfils its purpose well. It is a strong, well laid out communication device that performs all of the basic functions required. Although it lacks the more advanced features of Windbag, for someone looking for a basic light, portable unit, it would be ideal. It sells for \$3250.



Products

Hands Off!

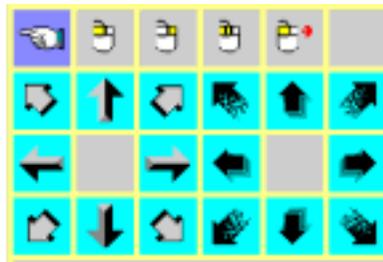
Powerful on-screen keyboard

This is a powerful on-screen keyboard with many useful features for people with special needs. The keyboard itself can be customised and re-sized. It supports scanning input through switches, or morse code input. Text or picture symbols can be used as key symbols. Each cell can type characters to the current application, run a program, carry out any of the special HandsOff commands, speak a message, operate an environmental control or load a new keyboard grid.

Speech output can be through recorded voices or synthesised speech (Microsoft Speech System). Full mouse control is also available through a special grid. This enables left and right clicks, double clicks and drag functions. Windows can be moved and re-sized.

HandsOff! links to other Sensory Software products, such as Windbag and Windspeak. The main keyboard grids are set for word prediction.

A great product with loads of features. It sells for around \$795.



The Mouse Control grid for switch users

Keyboards	Launch programs	Special
Simple	WordPad	Macros
Alpha	Windbag	IR control
QWERTY	Email	Picom
Fastscan	Internet Explorer	Solitaire
Auditory	Calculator	Coded Input
		Move grid
		Speed
		Scan Tasks
		Dock
		Exit

The main HandsOff grid



Products

Windbag

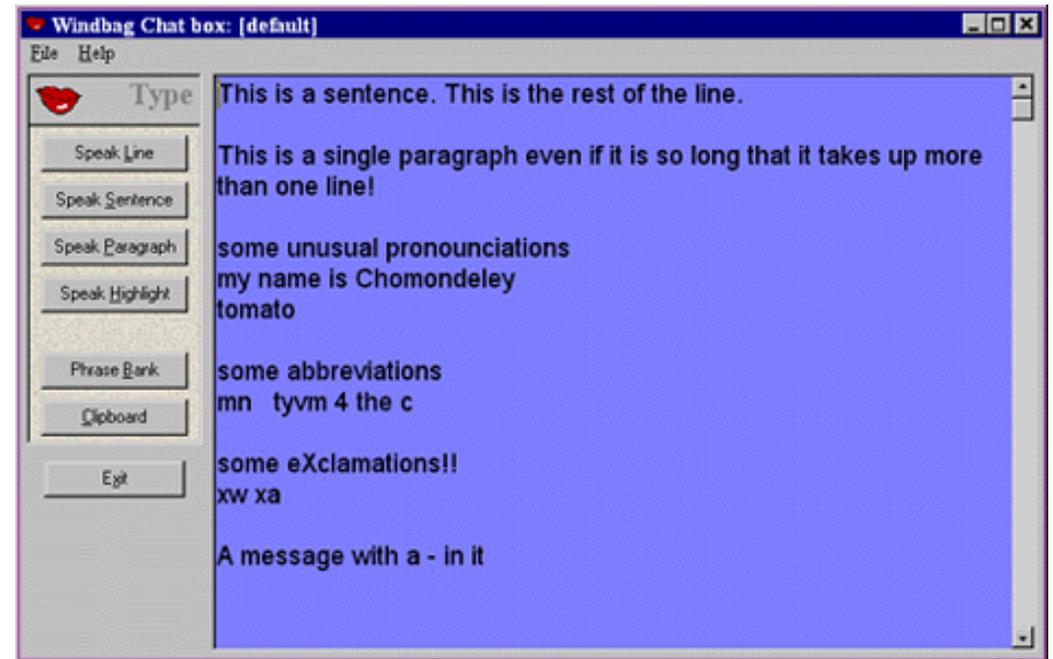
Turning a notebook computer into a communication device

Dedicated communication devices tend to be expensive, whereas notebook computers are getting cheaper. So it makes sense to use a small notebook as a communication device, if the right software is available. Enter Windbag. Excellent text-based speech output software.

This is more than just speaking out the words that you type. Windbag allows you to speak highlighted text, words, sentences or paragraphs. A range of instant messages (for common items such as Yes, No, Please, Thank You and OK) are pre-programmed. A further 26 instant messages can be accessed through single letter presses, after first clicking "=".

The Phrase Bank is a very powerful part of WindBag. It allows you to keep a huge list of phrases for use in any situation. You can then find up to 3000 of these messages very quickly, with just three keystrokes, although you can store many more than this. Messages are organised into Topics, and Topics can then be arranged into Contexts (such as school, work, shopping, etc). In this way very detailed conversations can be organised.

Windbag will work with most text-to-speech software. You can however purchase DECTalk or Laureate with Windbag, at an extra cost. Windbag costs around \$520 while DECTalk costs \$610.



Switch Director

If you use a single switch to control more than one device (such as computer, wheelchair, environmental control system) then Technical Solutions have developed a solution. Their Switch Director allows one switch to control either two devices (\$250) or four devices (\$500). One long switch press shifts the signal to the next device. A great idea!

ARATA Bound

We are looking forward to catching up with people in Brisbane at the ARATA Conference, October 2-4. Graeme Smith and Michael Berryman will be there. We are presenting a workshop on Speech Recognition. Please come and make yourself known to us.

Doctoral studies

Graeme Smith is in the home straight for his doctoral studies. He is examining the role of computer technology in employment outcomes for people with severe physical disabilities. He hopes to submit the thesis in March 2002.

His research will include several detailed case studies of people with quadriplegia and cerebral palsy who are successfully employed.

ABILITY TECHNOLOGY LIMITED

ABN 26 090 463 997

Post: Private Box 44, 145 Sydney Rd Fairlight NSW 2094

Ph: (02) 9907-9736 Fax: (02) 9907-9599

Email: info@abilitytech.com.au Web: www.abilitytech.com.au

