



Introducing Health Sciences: Visual Impairment

Returning to Work

Man

When I first came back to work as a blind person, which of course was a different experience than previously, there wasn't really a great deal of technology. I had an electric typewriter, and a Dictaphone, and a portable, both a desktop Dictaphone and a portable Dictaphone, and I had access to a secretary who could take shorthand, and a tape recorder. Over the past twenty-five years of course there's been a complete revolution in technologies, not just for me as a blind person but for all my colleagues in the office, and the way we work has changed beyond all recognition really, but for blind people the access technologies have kept up reasonably well with those mainstream changes, and I have a computer that has screen reader software on it that reads back to me so I can do email, I can write independently, I can read the internet, and talking of the internet of course that gives you huge resources, information resources as a blind person quite unparalleled to anything that we would have had twenty years ago even. One of the useful things about screen reading software these days is it's got a lot more sophisticated and I'm just going to show you one aspect. There are hundreds of aspects to it but is that you can go into screen reading which with long documents sometimes gives you that equal ability to work like your colleagues do 'cos not everybody reads every line of every document otherwise you'd never get through your work.

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Now I'm going to say I just want to know the first line of every paragraph of this document. It's preparing it now.

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It's put into links as well so for every first sentence of every paragraph with this paper I could just jump to those links. What I'm actually going to do is just ask it to start reading.

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So I'm getting an overview here of quite a long paper, it's several papers long, and it gives me links that I can then tap into if I want to find out more, but it's just a demonstration of the level of sophistication now that screen reading software has. I'm just going to demonstrate Kurzweil. This was a specialist piece of scanning software which Ray Kurzweil originally designed about twenty-five years ago, and it was a very expensive product in those days 'cos it came with a complete, with a computer and a scanner, but these days it's very affordable and just concentrates entirely on grabbing the text from any document book or leaflet, it doesn't worry about the graphics but it's very much designed for blind people to use. I'm just going to ask it to scan that and read it back to me. What it does, of course, is it saves it as an electronic file which I can then use for other purposes.

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The good thing about this program it tells you what's going on. There you go. So essentially when it's doing those, taking a picture of that, now it's recognising it as text.

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So therefore this gives me another level of independence. I can just pick up a piece of paper, put it into the scanner and ask it to read it to me. That's just an invitation to attend something to do with the students' association. So if Lynne, my PA, wasn't around that day I could just go through my post tray and pick out the things that were important to deal with on that day. As I said, the beauty of this software is it's very, very user friendly and it enables me to be

independent when I need and it's saved, I can save that as an electronic file like I would any other Word document and interact with it, either within this program or, just as importantly, in the screen reader program that I was using earlier on, so you've got this convergence of technology these days. So, for example, with that scanned document that I just did you could, I could just transfer that onto here which is a portable device, again it speaks when I turn it on, and it's got on it (DEMO) you see it's got my calendar on there, it's got my emails on there, it's got my contacts list on there, and I can either use the Braille display which is an electronic refreshable Braille display, or I can use the speech, or both. Obviously with all these devices I would normally use a headset to maintain my privacy but the exciting thing for blind people is that you can interchange information between portable devices and desktop PCs now with greater ease since we've all gone over to a digital technology system. I'd been developing my Braille skills in a slightly half-hearted way for a number years 'cos I think my ophthalmic surgeon had been encouraging me to do that and I never really picked up on why but he was saying, you know, I think you should pursue your Braille studies but obviously, like everything else in life, I didn't really take it seriously until I needed to, so once I was in that rehabilitation period after losing my sight I really would do a daily practice and a daily reading, so writing about it is quite difficult and so is reading it, so I used to concentrate on that quite a lot 'cos I needed to be able to communicate that way. One of the things I should emphasise, of course, for a blind computer user is that the interface you have with your computer is entirely through doing keystrokes, hot key commands, 'cos you can't use a mouse. It does, however, become quite fatiguing and it does take a lot of concentration sometimes, particularly when you have to remember a particular keystroke for a function that you might not use very often. I can be pretty independent with the help of my personal assistant at meetings on the, when I'm travelling I can read, I can check my emails, all sorts of very useful flexibility now, that wasn't available when I first came back to work.