

initiatives

Innovation Happens in Manitoba

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: THE INTERNET AND THE DISABLED

SEPTEMBER, 2002 – FISHER RIVER, MB – "Start!" At Rebecca Gordon's command her computer monitor began to glow. She continued speaking. "I want to write a letter to Fred McGuinness."

Oops! There's a break in the action. The computer doesn't know how to spell my name so Rebecca typed it on the keyboard. When she pushed a key she locked that spelling into the machine's memory and told me she'd never have to spell it again.

Rebecca Gordon was giving me a demonstration of 'voice recognition.' This is the means through which anyone with this program in a computer can communicate without touching the keyboard.

For Rebecca Gordon, voice recognition is one of the tools of her profession. Her title is 'Co-ordinator of Adaptive Technology,' and her specific assignment is training individuals with disabilities how to use computers.

At this point a word of explanation is in order. I'm not talking about ordinary computers on which we learn to cut-and-paste. Rather, I'm talking about computers equipped with some remarkable advancements.

Gordon's employer is Wheat Belt Community Futures, in Brandon. This is a summer job for this young student. She's a graduate from Brandon University in computer science and business administration, and she's now a nursing-science student at the U. of Manitoba.

As I watched and listened, she continued with that letter to me. She sounded like a fussy but literate executive dictating a letter to a shorthand artist. Here's what I heard.

"New line. New line. Dear Fred colon I am pleased to announce my appointment as co-

ordinator of adaptive technology at capitals on WheatBelt Community Futures capitals off period I would like to take this opportunity to tell you about our open quotation marks super computer close quotation marks but you get the idea.

As she spoke to the computer she was wearing a headset equipped with a small microphone. She spoke rapidly. When she was finished, she printed the letter and gave it to me for inspection. Perfect.

So, who really needs voice recognition? The last client on the day of my visit was a schoolteacher who had suffered a stroke; he is paralyzed on his left side and is now pursuing a second career as a writer of children's books.

As if Demo #1 weren't sufficiently impressive, she then gave me Demo #2. This featured "The Tracker." I believe The Tracker elevates computer technology to a new plateau. Rebecca Gordon fastened a small metallic sticker to her forehead. This item, smaller than an aspirin tablet, will let a person who is paralyzed operate any standard computer. With tiny head movements, up, down, side-to-side, it moves the computer's cursor exactly as you want it moved. When you have it in the desired position, you click, or double-click, in one of several ways depending on your capabilities.

Her employer, Wheat Belt CF, supports her activities through their program called "Entrepreneurs with Disabilities," which offers loans and business management training courses to disabled persons with viable business plans. She conducts her training classes in a small computer lab that contains the Community Connections public-access computers.

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