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Talking is faster than typing

By Help Desk

Al Gordon

In the sci-fi world users run their computers by voice and other exotic methods. In the real world we actually handle input by approximately the same methodology as a typing pool in the 1920s.

"The keyboard is not going to go away," says Chris Strammiello, director of product marketing for Burlington-based Nuance Inc., "but we are going to see a transformation in the business process."

He should know. Nuance (formally ScanSoft) is the dominant producer of speech-recognition software for Windows-based PCs. While the company does make an entry-level product for the Macintosh, the leader for Mac speech recognition is MacSpeech in Salem, N.H.

A little disclosure is probably in order here: about a decade ago, a keyboard-related repetitive motion injury left me unable to type, and until I finally recovered, my writing career was salvaged by one of the primitive speech-recognition systems available at the time. That product has morphed into Nuance's flagship product: Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8.

From my perspective the evolution of the technology is nothing short of a marvel. On that old version of Dragon, users had to dictate word ... by... word, accuracy was marginal, and the process slow and tedious. Now one dictates with "continuous speech" — which is to say in normal conversational form — and the software zips along.

In fact, if you are a poor typist, dictating may actually be faster. However, as Strammiello notes, "using the keyboard is such an ingrained habit." If you are used to writing that way, it just seems strange to be dictating. The problem is more one of taste and habit than technology.

I put NaturallySpeaking 8 and MacSpeech's iListen through their paces to write, uh, dictate this article with them. The two

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applications are roughly comparable in capabilities, but the fact that NaturallySpeaking has been around much longer and is much more evolved is fairly evident in use.

The Windows program is much faster and its interface is much more streamlined than its Mac counterpart. I thought iListen's correction mechanism, in particular, was awkward. But both programs did what they were supposed to do: let a user dictate text quickly and accurately. Both programs also have command and control capabilities, but I find those less impressive. One does better relying primarily on mouse and keyboard for that.

Aside from the software, you will also need a good headset microphone. If you don't have one already, both companies sell bundles that include them. It is a must, however, to use microphones with self-contained electronics that plug into your computer's USB port and bypass the sound card. The inherent electronic noise on your computer gets picked up by sound cards and ruins accuracy.

The bottomline question here is whether you can write as quickly by dictation as by typing, and the answer is most definitely "yes."

Voice isn't the only alternate way to input to your computer. Another option is to reverse the paper flow, as it were, via optical character recognition (OCR). The technology "reads" documents run through a scanner or in Adobe Acrobat PDF format and turns them back into computer files.

Nuance is a leading player here, too, with its flagship OmniPage Pro Product. But in this market it has only acquired most of the competition, not all of it. Archrival IRIS contends here, with its Readiris product. A playoff seemed in order. I fired up the scanner, looked for difficult documents to test, and tried them out.

Both products were accurate and easy to use. In Windows, OmniPage has the edge. It has more options for capturing layout and formatting information and has built-in editing tools that let you save data to a PDF file without having to run an intermediate editor.

On the Mac, though, the new Readiris 11 was king, with a streamlined interface in keeping with the Mac environment and multiple options for data output. IRIS also makes a very handy business card scanner IRIS Business Card Reader II and companion Cardiris software.

As with dictation products, the key test is whether using OCR is faster than retyping — and again, the answer is "yes."

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.com.

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