

Blind Preeti speaks of computer with speech device

Preeti Monga, a visually impaired woman entrepreneur, is the chief of the marketing operations of an established concern in Delhi. She is one of the few in the capital to have learnt operating computers with the help of the Computer Assistance for the blind (CAB).

She has since opened an outfit of her own and is actively involved in the welfare of the disabled. In this write up, written directly through the computer, she explains the way the CAB works.

Until late 1993, computer was the domain of the sighted alone in our country. Then in late 1993, with the introduction of the speech synthesiser, this magic machine became accessible to the visually impaired.

The need, today however, is to disseminate this vital information to the masses. The computer has a monitor which gives all the information on the screen which can only be seen. So, even if a visually impaired person manages to learn to operate a computer, it has been of no use, as there was no way to know what was being done. But now with the speech synthesiser, we can use the computer like any sighted person.

The speech synthesiser is a device which can be interfaced to any computer. Once this is done, this device speaks out what is keyed in. The software that is responsible for the speech output is called, CAB, "Computer Assistance for the Blind." There is one more device which when fitted into the computer gives speech output. This is known as the "Sound Blaster Card". The software which is used with this card is called "Talk". Both the software are from the "Indian Institute of Science and Technology", Bangalore.

The gadget speaks out the alphabet, number or punctuation which you key in simultaneously. With the various commands made available in this

software, it is possible to read character by character, word by word or the complete line on which the cursor is positioned. One can go into the reading mode and go in to the menus and get the talking device to read them, word by word or line by line.

The speech gadget can also read the complete document if you so desire. So, once some material is on the hard disk, or on the floppy, a visually impaired person can read it independently.

For ages, Braille has been the only script by which a visually impaired person can read or write independently. Although Braille is extremely useful, it is not possible to communicate with the sighted using the script. Moreover as there are not enough Braille presses, it is next to impossible for all the print matter to be made available to the blind. Also, as Braille has to be embossed, the paper used has to be thick. As a result, Braille books and magazines become too bulky, making stacking and transportation a problem. To overcome this hazard, blind persons have used voluntary readers to read to them. This meant they had to rely on their memory nearly completely, as the readers were also hard to come by.

Then came the use of tape-recorders and it was a kind of revolution. Now books could be read out and recorded simultaneously, which made it possible for the blind to be able to listen to these recordings repeatedly and thus improve their learning capacity. The books on tape are known commonly as talking books. Talking books are again few compared to the quantum of information required to stay abreast with the fast progressing world.

Computers with speech device is the answer. The speech device attached to the computer makes it possible for the sightless to have access to nearly all the text which is available to the

sighted. Most of the printed matter today is made ready on a computer before it is given to the printing press. There will hardly be any extra cost incurred to store the preprint matter on floppy diskettes, making these floppies available to blind persons as they will then have access to all such information through their talking computers.

Computer network had made it possible for people staying in one country to have easy access to articles and books in the other countries, thousands of miles away. This facility is also available in India. Most universities having internet facility make this available to students at a very nominal cost. It is also made available to those who are not students but would like to use this system, at a higher cost. It is the lack of awareness and information that is keeping this marvellous world of information and knowledge out of reach of the visually impaired. To make this network accessible to the sightless, all that is needed is a talking device to be attached to the computers used for networking. The cost of doing so will be negligible in the face of the cost incurred in putting up the entire system.

Although the speech synthesiser is still under development for marketing, the sound blaster card is available with companies like Hewlett Packard, Digital etc. The software talk can be obtained from I.I.S.T. Bangalore. Speech devices for computers can also be imported from the USA and the UK. In case further information is required it can be obtained from the National Association for the Blind, Sector-5, R.K. Puram.

Visual impairment is a disability, but given the opportunities and the facilities, we blind people can be productive members of the society. The effort and cost of providing the same will certainly not be too much.