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Dis-IT

Disability & Information Technologies Research Alliance

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Hard-wiring Inclusion

A Conference about Building an Accessible ICT World

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Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

In late October of last year I was lucky enough to be a delegate at the Dis-IT conference in Winnipeg. The Dis-IT conference is quite a unique experience to take part in, as it brings together individuals from varying backgrounds to discuss disability issues in the realm of information technology. This year's focus was technological development as a tool for all members of society.

Panel discussions were the majority of the sessions. These panels were represented by members of the disability community (people with disabilities and those who are service providers), industry and government. What this created was an open dialogue between all

stakeholders of technical innovation: end users, manufactures and service providers, as well as regulators. Discussions ranged from the services and supports offered by the telecommunications industry to the need of accessible design of manufactured goods at the blueprint stage as opposed to an afterthought of accommodation.

In addition to panel discussions there were four research groups presenting their findings. Dr. Gary Birtch was the first and gave a vivid illustration of the potential arising from wireless technology. His concept device, being designed jointly by the Neil Squire Society and Nokia and they hope to produce a handheld unit with PDA functionality, which also functions as a personal navigator, an electronic check book, a remote door opener, and an in-store merchandise browser. Professor Catherine Fichten of Dawson College spoke about her group's completion of a student survey. Two-hundred and forty-five college and university students with disability were asked questions pertaining to ease of learning using electronic classroom aids. An example of the group's findings is the preference of students for interactive web-based course material as opposed the same information delivered through a CD-ROM. Professor Aldred Neufeldt of the University of Calgary was the lead for a study examining currently implemented support for persons with disability in the workplace. One of their many findings was that solutions created for disabled staff members are often duplicated and used by their non-disabled counterparts, resulting in increased accessibility and effectiveness to the business as a whole. Professor Deborah Stienstra of the University of Manitoba discussed her group's findings concerning an online web-portal they created entitled [disabilitypolicy.ca](http://disabilitypolicy.ca). The website was designed to be a resource to the general public but particularly the disability community, as an easy access point for publications on public policy from every level of government. A parallel site was also created to provide an open conversation between the users accessing the policy site.

I have been working as the Adaptive Technologist at Trent University for the past 2 ½ years and was amazed to see such a collection of people but especially amazed to listen to them speak with one another. Dis-IT's conference delegates each had such a diverse background that it would almost have been impossible to prevent candid conversation. Many of them have been working in the disability community and/or have been living with a disability for much or all of their lives. I took this opportunity to observe and try as best I could to take it all in. The true focus of the conference, as I began to realize, was on engaging one another.

I was pleasantly surprised that throughout the two day event audience members were encouraged to ask questions and that the participation was so great that there were multiple discussions which had to be ended by the moderator for lack of time. There was no lack of enthusiasm at any point, as every person in the room voiced their legitimate suggestions, concerns and comments. After the first day I was so excited by the mountain of new perspectives and ideas, I was looking forward to my return to Trent to share them. The second day was equally engaging with even more thought-provoking issues and solutions being raised. However as the day went on I began to get the feeling that many of the delegates were tired. Not physically or mentally tired, but tired from repetition. I began to think about the tremendous excitement people's ideas were putting into me and I began to get the feeling that this was old hat for some of the delegates. For example when discussing telecommunication services available in Canada one delegate voiced his frustration that services offered in the United States for the past decade are still not available in Canada. Another delegate asked how she was expected to maintain a job when the software used by her company was not accessible to her because of her disability. To me, everything old was new again. As I have stated the enthusiasm for change was definitely present throughout;

however I believe that a great part of my excitement was because I was looking at some of these issues for the first time, while others present were still chipping away at situations they felt should have been resolved ages ago. This fortified in me the true nature of the conference emphasising the importance in communication, almost being of paramount concern when attacking problems such as technological development. Before becoming an Adaptive Technologist I trained as a computer scientist and I know first hand that solutions implemented by even the most well-intentioned people can often not meet the needs of the intended users. Hence the need for communication.

I returned to Peterborough with a particular project in my mind. Trent University is one of many members of the Liberated Learning Consortium which investigates the use and improvement of speech recognition software, particularly the IBM program ViaScribe. I have been lucky enough to be a member of the Trent team that contributes work to this project. My mind was fixed on the idea of communication as well as the inclusion of external experts in furthering a common goal. With that in mind I decided to send an e-mail to a fellow delegate of the Dis-IT conference who I know would have the breadth of knowledge and technical expertise to advise development in an area that interested me: Transcription of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) telephone calls. After drafting and revising I sent the e-mail hoping for a response. Unfortunately there was none and I began to empathise with the feeling I perceived during the last few hours of the conference. That feeling that much has yet to be done and that sometimes, what you think will be incredible and advancing, simply gets stalled. It was frustrating.

Then my first feelings of the conference slid back into my mind. Communication is so important. Even as I write this I can feel the excitement building again because once a

dialogue has started, even after searching, it is that sharing of ideas and cooperation that will be the difference to advancement. The old adage advises that delay is not denial. Changes *are* being made. New solutions are being created. The importance is that the communicating never stop, and that the search for new people to communicate with and to share insights with, never ceases. Epiphanies always seem more probable when others contribute.