The Federal Lawyer In Cyberia

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"Make It So" with Voice Recognition Software

I have to confess that—as a hopelessly addicted "early adopter"—I attended a lawyer/techie conference well over a decade ago and paid an exorbitant price for a very early edition of a product called Via-Voice.™ It was speech recognition software that was just then emerging, and it relied on what was referred to as "discrete speech." (No, not discreet speech, like your mother tried to teach you, but reciting words into a microphone connected to your computer with a pause between each word, so that the primitive voice recognition software of the day could pick out the individual words.) With ViaVoice I had seen the future and recognized the potential of the software. I just had to have this new thing.

However, all too soon I was vexed by the difficulty that discrete speech presented, and, frustrated by my mediocre results, I hired a certified ViaVoice trainer. "Think of your head as if it were a metronome," he said with a straight face. "Move it left and right while you're using your microphone headset and say one word as you move your head to the left and the next word as you move your head to the right," he instructed. Well, this quickly became boring and, in the presence of others, it seemed to me that it made it look like I was trying to do an impression of the village idiot. My expensive ViaVoice software was soon abandoned, and I went back to manual typing.

But, alas, I watched television: I saw James T. Kirk and his successor, Capt. Jean-Luc Picard, turn on the main computer of the massive *Starship Enterprise* merely by uttering the voice command, "Computer!"—and I dared to dream. Voice recognition software that worked would one day exist. I knew it.

Years have passed since then. Consumer-level voice recognition products have come and gone. Software development companies have risen and fallen and have sometimes been "acquired." In the meantime, many large corporations have converted their telephone service centers to commercial voice recognition systems. I am sure you've called to check the flight status of a plane and had an electronic voice ask you either to say or to key in the number of the flight you're calling about.

Today, when I call the help desk at Westlaw™, an ethereal female-sounding voice answers immediately and asks me to "speak" the numerical portion of my Westlaw password. When I call information on my cell phone, another ethereal voice says, "City and state, please." (I always flash back to Capt. Picard as I recite my numbers: "Make it so!"—Picard's signature phrase from the captain's chair of the *Enterprise*, actually a quotation from C.S. Forester's Hornblower novels, but one that worked for Picard and for me.) Even now, as I recite my assigned number series to the Westlaw automaton, I instinctively move my head like a metronome and smile, knowing that the gesture is unnecessary and a bit silly, but I see it as both a joke on myself and a smug reminder of my early seeming powers of prognostication.

Well, the future is arriving. First of all, I have a virtual secretarial service that I have recommended to readers several times in the past. If you need something special and don't want to fumble through documents yourself or you have a secretary who's already burdened, there's no better solution than an Internet transcription service. I use LawDocsXpress (www.lawdocsxpress.com), and it is wonderful. These days, nothing (including price) precludes you from outsourcing all your typing via the Internet to LawDocsXpress. The service is truly a hassle-free solution.

However, I still do much of my own work in-house, sans secretary. Fortunately, a company called Nuance has emerged from the fray as the king of voice recognition software. Based in Burlington, Mass., Nuance is now the leading provider of speech recognition software for both businesses and consumers around the world. We are all crossing paths with Nuance by calling directory assistance, getting account information, or "telling" our car's global positioning navigation system our proposed destination. The Nuance product that is of interest to Cyberian lawyers is actually a little less expensive (in its lawyer edition) than the ViaVoice discrete speech software I bought many moons ago. Nuance's program is called NaturallySpeaking™, and it comes in many editions, some home editions retailing for as little as $50. The edition that is designed specifically for the legal profession (and contains a legal vocabulary as well as the ability to recognize and type the spoken special odd "words" we use like "F second") is also called NaturallySpeaking. This version is referred to as the "Lawyer's Edition," and it retails for just under $1,000.

The Lawyer's Edition of NaturallySpeaking is now in version 9.5, and needless to say, it no longer relies
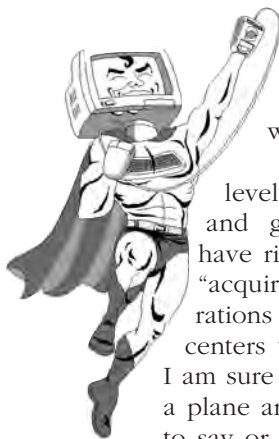
on discrete speech and metronome heads. In effect, you can write with your voice. I received a copy of the latest version from Nuance a couple of months ago and have been experimenting with it ever since. NaturallySpeaking 9.5 can handle continuous speech—that is, the way all of us normally speak in conversation and does not require a break-in train-the-software period, as was the case with many earlier editions. The program works right out of the box. I am amazed at the advances that have been made in the technology. Its technology has moved light years, to put it in Star Trek terms. And it works.

Most people speak more than 120 words per minute but type fewer than 40 words a minute. I figure that I speak a little faster and probably type a little slower. NaturallySpeaking, therefore, produces legal documents, referral letters, and e-mails for me more than three times faster than I can produce them if I am typing by hand. The legal version enables users like me to create special voice commands that instantly build and format templates for legal citations that might be a little obscure. (Unfortunately, it does not yet respond to "Make it so!" in quite the way I'd like it to respond.) The creation of templates speeds things up even more. The software can even read back, aloud, what it has typed (making it the electronic personification of res ipsa loquitur, I suppose), thereby helping with proofreading the document.

I still occasionally have vexing formatting issues with even the latest iteration from Nuance; therefore, I tend to prefer to use NaturallySpeaking in conjunction with WordPerfect™ rather than Word™ since WordPerfect's "reveal codes" feature is so handy when it comes to working through formatting problems.

If you're considering voice recognition software, I give NaturallySpeaking 9.5 a big thumbs up, but I recommend that, rather than shopping around the Internet or on eBay for the lowest price, you consider buying it from a Nuance-certified/licensed vendor who will assist you when you run into a problem and perhaps one that additionally includes a proprietary NaturallySpeaking installation-and-use guide (to help avoid various pitfalls, given that this is a fairly sophisticated product and installation is one of the hurdles you'll need to face—though I must say that I had few issues and my installation process went very well). One such vendor can be found at www.knowbrainer.com. There are other vendors out there, and Nuance's Web site (www.nuance.com) can steer you to a licensed vendor who is in your geographic neighborhood, if that is important to you.

I also recommend that you have sufficient horsepower (that is, RAM in your computer) as well as a good sound card; in addition, you should be sure to have a very good microphone. If the software makes a mistake, take the time to teach it what you actually said—this will actually help the program's accuracy improve over time.

A Google™ search will turn up outfits that provide "canned" training programs. You should consider investing in one, because voice recognition software requires some adjustments on the part of the user. One such product that has received good reviews can be found at www.sayican.com.

You should consider "making it so" and going with the future. In this instance, I can truly say that the future (naturally speaking) is now. **TFL**

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