

IOWA

Voice recognition software becoming viable

Advances mean changes to dictation services

By John Kenyon

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Anyone who has called information looking for a phone number has encountered voice recognition software. But more and more, people are using such tools in the workplace and in the home.

One of the best known of these tools is Dragon software from Nuance. With versions ranging from a \$200 program for use on home computers to a \$1,200 model specifically designed for the medical or legal professions, the software has advanced to the point where it is keeping the Iowa dealer very busy.

Bruce Fagerstrom, president of WahlTek in Des Moines, said he has been involved in the dictation business for 20 years. Voice recognition technology was part of that the entire time, but it is just now reaching a point where it is a viable option for most people, he said.

"The technology was out there, but it was not really good enough in terms of accuracy," said Mr. Fagerstrom, whose company is the Iowa representative for the software. "People would use it, but it wouldn't recognize their voice as well as vendors were stating."

Times have changed and people now can dictate at a normal pace and have their words converted automatically to text.

The two primary markets for the software are health care and law because those are the groups that do the most documentation, Mr. Fagerstrom said.

For example, WahlTek is working with two MercyCare locations in the Cedar Rapids area, he said. In the past, doctors would dictate into a handheld dictation unit, which would then be sent to in house transcribers or out to a service, a process that could take up to 48 hours. Now, dictation can be done automatically with software, and the doctor's notes can go directly into the report.

That will eventually lead to a shift in personnel as those people charged with transcribing taped reports will no longer be needed. However, there are different types of voice recognition software use, Mr. Fagerstrom said, and one type involves cre-

ating a report that still must be corrected. This could be a new role for transcribers.

For example, a trial of the software at the MercyCare office in Marion involves a physician's assistant who plans to dictate notes into a handheld digital device. Those notes would be downloaded into the program and a nurse would then view the resulting report and make any corrections necessary.

Mr. Fagerstrom said the cost of moving to voice recognition software is favorable. With the \$1,200 per program cost at the high end, customers can see a return on investment within six months to a year depending on usage.

There is another product on the market that does similar things made by Philips, but Mr. Fagerstrom said it is more targeted to high-end medical offices. While Dragon sells a personal version geared for home use, he said WahlTek does not deal with that level of the program. Consumers can find it and similar titles at electronics stores like Best Buy.

Mr. Fagerstrom said he has been in talks with University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics about doing training on Dragon software it purchased elsewhere. **CBJ**