CIRCUIT COURT

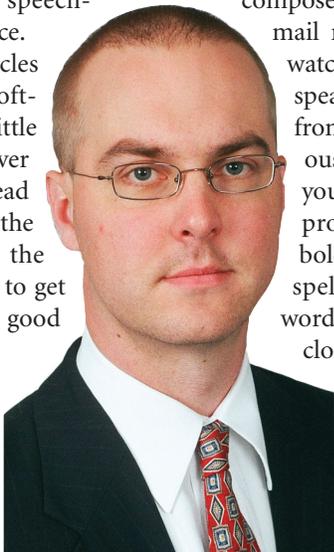# Speech-Recognition Software More Reliable Than Ever

By N. KANE BENNETT

"Does this really work?" That was the first thing I said into the microphone when I tried out Dragon NaturallySpeaking 9, the speech-recognition software by Nuance.

I had read a lot of articles about speech-recognition software and started to feel a little behind the times because I never tried it. Most of what I had read focused on complaints about the technology's accuracy and the amount of training necessary to get started. There were plenty of good excuses to never try it.

However, lately there is a lot of buzz in the industry on how improved the technology is, especially the enhanced version designed for legal work. In fact, if you have been to a deposition lately and the court reporter looks like he is talking into a vacuum or a mask, he's not—he's using speech-recognition software.

To answer the question about whether it works, it does. As a new Dragon user, I could not help but be impressed with the technology.

Here is how it works: You speak into a microphone that is plugged into your computer. Then you sit back and watch your computer type everything you say, including basic punctuation. The software converts your speech into text on computer documents or e-mails.

So far, I've been able to use Dragon to compose letters, memos and send e-mail messages. I can sit back and watch my documents develop as I speak. It is a nice change of pace from typing. Dragon has numerous voice commands that allow you to use all of the typical word processing functions such as bold, underline, indent, change spellings, and delete and add words. If you want to open and close the file menu on your document, you simply say "click file."

As for training and start-up time, I was able to use Dragon fairly well the first time after about a half hour reading parts of the manual and another 20 minutes taking the tutorial that comes with the software. The tutorial allows you to start to train Dragon to recognize your voice. To get the most out of the software, you really need to spend time training it as you go. When Dragon types a word that is wrong, you can train it to recognize the right word in the future. It has to be done word by word, but you can also give Dragon names and words in advance for your documents. Dragon also gives you tips on how to improve accuracy as you go.

The real question I have is whether the software will allow me to work more efficiently or save money by not using support staff time for typing. The novelty of using speech recognition will wear off really fast if you cannot save time and money with it.

So far, I can see a real benefit using Dragon for first drafts of letters or briefs, or for any long documents. I have been able to speak faster than I can type with both letters and numbers. As for editing, at this point, Dragon is definitely not as easy as doing it manually.

Dragon takes some getting used to for users of a traditional Dictaphone. For example, with traditional dictation, you get back typos in spelling. With Dragon, you get words that are spelled correctly but are not what you said.

Background noise also seems to create problems that you do not experience with a Dictaphone, although I have read that certain microphones may help with that problem. The biggest difference, however, is seeing your text appear as you are talking. With Dragon, I notice a tendency to want to correct everything immediately when it might be better to wait for the finished product.

Many law firms started using digital dictation as a way to save money on word processing by streamlining in-house dictation or outsourcing it. As a new user of Dragon, I am not yet ready to say speech recognition is a better way to go for overall cost savings on word processing. For some, digital dictation with a dedicated word processor will remain quicker and more accurate than Dragon.

However, Dragon is the cheaper option with the legal version running around $1,000 and the more basic versions under $200. Also, Dragon requires no overhead costs, takes up no office space and works at all hours. Ultimately, Dragon may be the best cost-saving option for word processing. ∎

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