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VIVA VIA VOICE!
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I remember watching Star Trek on television years ago as Captain Kirk, Spock and the others carried on conversations with the computer that ran the operations and life support systems of the Star Ship Enterprise. That, as my kids would say, was “back in the day”. Back in the day the computer on board the Enterprise and later everyone’s best friend, Hal, the computer in the movie 2001, had the ability to understand the spoken word and to respond to it with words and by action. It seemed only reasonable for a computer to do that.

Several years later, as a political science student at Berkeley during the 60’s, a time when the empiricists had staged a coup and taken over the department from the theorists (after all, it was Berkeley), I had my first opportunity to converse with a computer. Imagine my disappointment when I learned that the computer, which took up a whole building and had substantially less computing power than my current laptop computer, could not understand or respond to the spoken word.

As computer hardware and software evolved, I kept looking for viable voice recognition technology (“VRT”). After many years, I concluded that the search for viable VRT shared much with quests for the Holy Grail. Each new iteration of a leading VRT program attracted my attention. Each failed to justify my never-ending hope that this would be THE time it worked.

In the last several years, we have seen the ranks close in the development of VRT. Today we are down to only a few. The two leaders being Dragon (now owned by Scansoft) which produces the Naturally Speaking software for Windows-based computers and IBM which continues to develop its Via Voice software for both Macintosh and Windows platforms.

For a long time, most of the reviewers looking at VRT for attorneys considered Dragon the leader in the field. I am not so sure that remains true today. IBM's (www.IBM.com) Via Voice for Windows Pro USB Edition Release 10 closes the gap and may well now have taken the lead. The package comes with a manual, a fold-up card with the basic command structure for the software, a disk and a Plantronics (www.plantronics.com) DSP-300 USB headset. I consider Plantronics an excellent choice as I am particularly fond of Plantronics headsets and have used them happily for the last couple of years for all my VRT efforts.

The program installs in about 35 minutes. You don't have to do much, as IBM has automated the process very well. Load the disk and tell it to install the program. It goes on for a while and tells you it has to restart the computer to complete the installation. After restarting the computer and allowing the installation process to conclude (about a 25-30 minute process), the real fun begins. Now you get to train the program.

For those of you that remember hours of reading into the computer to train it, only to have the program prove unable to understand you, Via Voice release 10 provides a pleasant surprise. After completing the installation of the software, I plugged the headset into the computer, allowed the computer to recognize it and install it as hardware and then went through a very short setup process to let the program check everything out and adjust itself to the hardware. I then read one short selection into the computer to allow the software to start to familiarize itself with my voice. The computer said I could read more or proceed to dictate. I chose to proceed with my first test.

Although I knew that VRT software always works best after having had more than just the most basic training, I wanted to see what this program could do with just the most preliminary voice information about me. To my surprise and delight, I dictated several paragraphs into the program and it came out substantially as I dictated. Certainly the software made a few mistakes, but far fewer than I had ever experienced before with a new VRT program, even after lengthier voice training. A little more voice training (another 20 minutes) resulted in further improvement. With respect to voice-training VRT software, you need to know that the more you do, the better the

program gets AND the more you do the smaller the improvement you get in exchange for your effort (as the program gets better with your voice, it takes more work to achieve each improvement).

Via Voice gives you the option of working in its own word processor (called "SpeakPad") or dictating directly into other programs. It links itself automatically to current versions of Microsoft Word, but not to Word Perfect. You can dictate in programs other than Word (including Word Perfect), it just doesn't work quite as automatically. In my experiments, however, even in Word, the accuracy rate suffers a bit by comparison to dictation in the program's own SpeakPad. Since you can save SpeakPad documents as Word documents, it may make better sense to use the SpeakPad than to work directly in Word due to the program's superior accuracy within SpeakPad. It is, of course, possible to cut and paste text from SpeakPad to other programs, should you encounter problems trying to use Via Voice within the other program.

I found that if I spoke carefully and at a measured rate, I could get reasonably accurate output from the program using it for general dictation (letters, memos, notes, etc.). When I tried to dictate legal citations, however, the results left much room for improvement. The program does not handle legal citations well on its own. It requires substantial training to make that work right (I can't tell you how much as I haven't gotten there yet!). Adding IBM's Legal Vocabulary Pack (a separate purchase) is supposed to solve that problem and would be a worthwhile expenditure if it did. Ultimately, I tried adding IBM's Legal Vocabulary into the program. Unfortunately, it did not solve the problem as the program continued to have problems with the form of legal citations.

VRT programs sometimes have problems differentiating between commands and dictation. Sometimes they interpret a command as dictation and convert it to text. Sometimes they simply do nothing. Other times they correctly interpret it as a command and react to it appropriately. Via Voice version 10 is no exception; it did better than earlier versions, but still, at least at this stage of its training had frequent problems with distinguishing between commands and dictation.

Because of the problems that I experienced with trying to use the program for legal citations and also with respect to command/dictation confusion by the program, I will use the program for general dictation purposes and then move it to Word for formatting, corrections of Via Voice transcription errors and the insertion of legal citations. I can work much faster that way (and with much less frustration) than I can trying to get the citations right and make corrections using Via Voice. Undoubtedly, if I took the time to work through each mistake with the program and correct it, it would get better and better. I am not presently willing to devote the time that kind of training will ultimately require. Over time, I may do it a little at a time. (That is an individual user's decision, however, and you may choose to go a different way). I find that I am very happy, however, with the prospect of dictating to the computer and getting a usable draft of the text that I can have my secretary clean up (or clean up myself).

The Summation: The program costs \$189.95 with an excellent Plantronics headset that the Plantronics website lists as an \$89 retail item. If you have a recent earlier version of Via Voice, the upgrade cost is only \$94.95. It takes some of your time for training and that counts as part of the cost. If you follow the rules, it does a decent job on general dictation. It also can do all right with some basic commands. If you want to start using VRT, this is a good time to start and this is a good program, easily worth what it costs. BUT, don't buy it thinking that you will no longer need a secretary. The wheels come off the truck when you try to dictate legal citations and it has problems differentiating commands from dictation when you try to make corrections. Consider using it to generate your initial draft of a document and just for general dictation of text and making corrections and inserting citations with the keyboard. Unless you are willing to spend a lot of time training the program, you will find that it takes less time to move the document created by Via Voice into Word and deal with formatting, legal citations and corrections from the keyboard.

The Verdict: IBM's Via Voice Version 10 Pro USB Edition makes your computer a workable transcriber for general text dictation. It is well worth its cost. VRT has reached the point that it can become a functional tool in your law office.