

ESBLN Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network
Putting Ability to Work www.esbln.org
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Accessibility Features on Your Own Computer

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At a recent training event, staff from the Maryland Technology Assistance Program (www.mdtap.org) quoted IBM's 1991 training manual: "For people without disabilities, technology makes things easier. For people with disabilities, technology makes things possible."

As we grow older, many of us will find size 8 or 10 font just too small to read and will find ourselves saying, "Now, where did I put my reading glasses?" Zooming in on a document or increasing the text size on a webpage sure has made it easier for us and reduces stress on our aging eyes. For people with a wide array of disabilities (including cognitive, hearing, vision, and physical), assistive technology means more than making life easier, it provides life opportunities. IT companies are well aware of this and are constantly improving the accessibility of their products. Listed below are a few of the many built-in accessibility features in the Windows XP operating system. Most folks are probably not aware that these features are readily available and are quite easy to use. Microsoft's Accessibility page (www.microsoft.com/enable/) provides demos, tutorials, case studies, and business resources. The page also provides information on the accessibility features for the Vista operating system, Internet Explorer, Microsoft Office, and Outlook.

For example, icon sizes can be made larger or smaller. Adjusting screen resolution and contrast schemes make the screen easier to see. To reduce distraction, the cursor blinking can be eliminated. Sounds can be changed to indicate low battery, close program, exit Windows, etc. ShowSounds displays captions for speech and sounds. SoundSentry displays visual warnings like a blinking title bar.

Many things can be done with the mouse such as switching the function of the right and left mouse buttons or changing the size and shape of the cursor for better visibility. The Dvorak Keyboard Layout is used by people who type with one hand or finger. StickyKeys allow pressing one key at a time (rather than simultaneously) for key combinations.

In addition, Windows users can configure groups of accessibility options that address visual, hearing and dexterity needs all in one place such as using Narrator, a text-to-speech utility that reads what is displayed or text that has been typed. Also available is an on-screen keyboard that displays a virtual keyboard

on the computer screen that allows people to type data by using a pointing device or joystick.

Of course, Microsoft is not the only company to incorporate accessibility features in their operating systems. According to the Apple website (www.apple.com/accessibility/), accessibility features in the Mac OS X operating system offers the same as those mentioned above. From this webpage, you can also link to information on Section 508 and additional accessibility solutions at the Mac Products Guide.

According to the results of a 2003 study by Microsoft, “In the next decade, the lines between mainstream expectations for technology and what we now call ‘accessible technology’ will continue to blur significantly. More and more, computers will adjust to a person rather than the person adjusting to the computer.”