

Patsy Bowman, the deaf liaison for the governor's Office for Individuals with Disabilities, tries out the new Connect Direct system during a demonstration while her interpreter stands by.



Maryland Library Eliminates Boundaries for Hearing- and Speech-Impaired Customers

by Shirley Aronson and Michael S. Miller

The Professional Development Committee, which coordinates the PDC Desktop Learning Opportunity Series, encourages members to explore professional development offerings and opportunities at the local, regional and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Lori Hedstrom at 651/687-5891 or lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com.



With more than 28 million Americans nationwide who are considered deaf or hard of hearing and nearly 290,000 with hearing or speech disabilities in Maryland, the Maryland State Law Library is the first state law library in the nation to install a new communication system for the hearing and speech impaired.

Before implementing this new system, MSLL had already enhanced its facility to better serve users with disabilities. The library had reconfigured its space to include computer tables and study carrels to accommodate wheelchairs, wider aisles for easier maneuvering, handicapped restroom facilities and parking areas, and relatively easy access to the building. The Web site is “Bobby-approved” (see sidebar) and conforms to the necessary standards for disabled users. The library then set out to discover what might be the next logical step.

Broadening Direct Connections

After investigating other avenues to make the library more accessible to users with disabilities, MSLL surmounted a major communications hurdle in 2001 with the installation of Connect Direct, a telephone communication system that allows people who are deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech disability to gain direct access to public services staff. The library contacted TeleSonic, a telecommunications company headquartered in Annapolis, Md., www.telesonic.com, that marketed a system called NXi Text Services for the Deaf. This system connects teletype (TTY) machines or personal computers using phone lines to PCs

in a library. Some available systems allowed either TTY or PC links, but none were equipped with the advanced software that could distinguish and communicate with both devices.

A customer using a telephone relay system (TTD) had to call a relay service. An operator then relayed the typed communication verbally to the librarian. This system, though it was the best available at the time, offered only a limited solution. It meant communicating personal information through a third party who had no reason to have that knowledge other than it was the only way for the disabled party to obtain the help needed. Navigating through the maze of legal information is hard enough for the nonlawyer without the added burden of depending upon a third party to understand legal terms and convey the information correctly.

AALL Professional Development Program Competencies of Law Librarianship

1 Core Competencies

Specialized Competencies

2 Library Management

3 Reference, Research and Client Services

4 Information Technology

5 Collection Care and Management

6 Teaching

This article addresses the AALL Specialized Competencies on Reference, Research and Client Services and Information Technology. The complete AALL statement of Competencies of Law Librarianship is online at <http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/competencies.asp>.

Connect Direct allows the customer to communicate directly — hence the name — with the library staff through PCs. It's a form of “instant messaging” or “live reference” — both parties are “talking” in real time. The customer may not have to purchase any special equipment because he or she may already have a TTY with a line readout for the relay system or a PC. The library software is configured to translate either format into words that computers can “read.”

After successfully persuading MSLL's parent organization — the courts — to proceed with this innovative assistive technology, the next challenge was preparing the library for the installation. At the time

the contract was signed, the library received a proposed timeline for the conception, scriptwriting, installation, testing and unveiling of the system. This document, which outlined the responsibilities of the library and the vendor, kept the installation on track and served as a checklist and system roadmap.

The library ordered dedicated telephones. MSLL added one toll-free in-state line and two local lines on a relay, so that when a customer receives a busy signal, the call is automatically routed to a second line.

Next, the library connected four PCs to the system. Setting up two computers at the information desk for incoming calls and two in the public-access area allows staff to answer calls emanating from outside the library and to direct customers who were in the library itself to one of the public PCs equipped with the software for in-house communication. Customers using the library onsite were previously forced to communicate with librarians using pencil and paper.

Finally, with much handholding from the vendor, the library developed a flow chart to direct incoming calls and a script that provided the customer with choices from different menus. Callers can find out about the library's hours of operation or location or "speak" to a reference librarian. After hours, callers can leave a message requesting information.

For about \$3,000, excluding any new hardware, MSLL offers this sensible, sensitive service to a new category of customers. The price depends upon the number of modem ports needed, the number of PCs to be equipped with the software for the system (i.e., licensing fees), training needs and the amount of software installation assistance needed. The package included the software; a system administrator manual; and a two-hour training session for the system administrator to handle routine troubleshooting matters, including rebooting the system in case of a power outage. All reference staff was trained on the signals typically recognized by this segment of the population and advised of appropriate etiquette for this format. For example: Don't use all capital letters in the message; it conveys the idea of screaming at the recipient. Identify yourself to the caller because there is no "voice

recognition." After typing the message, typing "ga," short for "go ahead," lets the caller know that the librarian is finished and that it is the user's turn to respond; "sk," short for "stop keying," at the end of a message signals "goodbye."

Before introducing the new system to users, the library staff became conversant and comfortable with the service. All the bugs were worked out; trial calls were made and answered. An incoming call is announced by a "beep" on the computer and a graphic of a ringing phone. The caller is "greeted and welcomed" to the library and is queried on how a librarian can be of service. Using this "instant messaging" feature, the caller and librarian can "discuss" the reference or legal question, with the caller receiving the desired privacy.

Hearing-impaired users now have the ability to conduct research with a minimum amount of stress, a maximum amount of privacy, and much better communication between the customer and the reference staff. This population segment is no longer forced to undertake a vast amount of planning to use the services of a third party to accomplish their research goals.

During testing and training stages, the library staff planned for the official unveiling of Connect Direct on Nov. 15, 2001. The guest list included dignitaries, such as the chief judges of Maryland's two appellate courts, the Court of Appeals and the Court of Special Appeals; clerks of the two appellate courts; the program manager of Maryland Relay Service; Telecommunications Access of Maryland; the administrative specialist for the deaf and hard of hearing in the governor's Office for Individuals with Disabilities; representatives of various advocacy groups for hearing-impaired people; local and regional library schools and organizations; and local customers who would benefit from the new service. The library distributed press releases about the new service to local, regional and trade newspapers. Reporters covered the event. The editor of *Tapping Technology*, a digital newsletter, wrote a feature article about the new Connect Direct system in the December 2001 issue. The article is available online at http://www.mdtpa.org/tt/2001.12/art_8.html. Leonard Blackshear, president of TeleSonic, Inc., was on hand to field questions about

Bobby Approved

"Bobby," represented by a picture of an English policeman — complete with a traditional tall hat — is a recognized trademark that lets the user know that the Web site being searched complies with existing accessibility guidelines.



Bobby, an evaluation tool, assists Web page creators to identify and thereby repair any barriers to access by people with disabilities. It flags accessibility violations and suggests changes to improve a site's usability. Small changes (such as not using "blinking" words) can make the difference between being able or unable to use a Web site for anyone with a disability.

other uses and configurations of NXI Text Service. Library staff brought baked goods to be sure that those in attendance were treated sweetly. In addition, the library produced a brochure detailing the new service and distributed it to all county public library systems in the state.

Measuring Success, One Customer at a Time

Is Connect Direct a rousing success? That depends on how success is measured. Is success the total number of customers who use the system? The total number of queries answered? The constant ringing of the phone? Or is it giving each individual customer the information he or she needs? Is success helping home-bound people escape their boundaries and become active in the community in a way never dreamed possible? Success is all of the above.

About a dozen callers have used the service so far; 10 were new customers — a fivefold increase. But the numbers shouldn't really be the bottom line here.

Certainly the library would like to see the number of users for the Connect Direct service increase. It wants more people to use the new system — not for statistics sake, but to know that MSLL is reaching out to more people — people

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who previously lacked access. Thus, those users end up more productive and improve their quality of life. That mission happens one customer at a time.

What does the future hold? Certainly as the system becomes better known, more customers will use the service. MSLL's work is not finished, but the library is well on its way to providing equal access to its disabled users.

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