

## Technology for Lawyers - A Review (Sort of) of Speech Recognition Software

Speech recognition software, where the computer translates your dictation into words or commands, is an evolving technology that could be of tremendous assistance to lawyers who are keyboard challenged, or in my case, too lazy to type. I type a newsletter and many documents at home, and while I'm a decent typist, the idea of being able to dictate and have it appear before me on my computer screen during composition is very appealing. So when a friend suggested that he had been able to accurately dictate a brief with Dragon Naturally Speaking, the "if I don't have this before the weekend is out, I will die unhappy" part of my brain began to throb. I took off for Sams (motto: "you will go broke saving money here") only to learn that they were out of the Dragon, but they had the IBM Speech Recognition Software. The IBM product had pretty pictures, promised a 30 hour work week with perpetually satisfied clients, was cheaper than the Dragon advertised price and it had a double your money back guarantee. This was a no brainer, and the lower price convinced me that I was saving money as I dropped \$140 on my newest time saver.

Seven hours and a long letter (typed, not dictated) to IBM later, I dutifully packed the software back in the box and returned it for a refund. I had read stories and paragraphs to my machine until I was hoarse, and although the manual (which I actually read) extolled how the software would continue to improve over time, I had not been able to accomplish writing a single paragraph without multiple errors when I finally gave up and began typing the project. The simplest of words befuddled the software at times, and the correction commands frequently added to the headache, as the computer would type my command instead of doing what was asked. This increased the corrections needed. The more I struggled to teach the software, the more ornery it became. I got tired of seeing "trowel" instead of "trial" brief, followed by "go back two words; go to beginning of line; do something; oh @\$%^&!".

The included headset/microphone was clumsy and ill fitting, and moved out of position if I breathed hard or moved my lips. And while I thought it was cool to prance around the house looking like an airline pilot (or is that receptionist?), I never got used to having a foam bug within 5 microns of my tongue, which was the recommended position. And if you did not achieve the nirvana position, your dictation would suffer. Actually it would commit suicide. I would calmly and rationally dictate a brilliant statement/argument/whatever, the computer would flash a "?" (meaning "say what?"), which would then cause me to begin shouting, at which point the computer would turn its back on you and pretend it couldn't hear. (For those of you who are married, this should be a simple concept). Or worse, it would simply lie and say it understood and then print something that a space alien might understand, but a judge would have a difficult time with (well, maybe not, depends on the judge). I reinstalled the software, readjusted the headphones, and double checked the computer requirements, which were fine. It still ignored me, so I quit talking to it. I have informed IBM that its product stunk and have given the reasons why, but I still don't have the promised refund, so there is a certain delight in writing this article. But I wouldn't want you to think that I am vindictive or biased. OK, I am vindictive and biased, so take that into consideration if you are dumb enough to go out and buy this product.

As my laziness is still capable of overcoming my common sense, I promptly went out and bought Dragon Naturally Speaking (Preferred Edition--\$180), and immediately fell for the promises on the box and marveled at the nifty awards that it had received from countless software magazine editors, who obviously typed only 2 line E-mails using words with one syllable. This time the training part was actually painless. As with the IBM product, the software is trained by dictating known words, but in the case of Dragon, the training material consists of stories and articles by comedy writer Dave Barry and business cartoonist, Scott Adams, who authors "Dilbert." Pretty funny stuff, but unfortunately, it didn't take the sting out of the fact that I never made it past the second paragraph of my dictation after a couple of hours of dictating, yelling and screaming. It appears that unless you talk like the robot on Lost in Space ("Danger, Will Robinson"), voice recognition software has difficulty in understanding you. I have been told that I have a Midwestern accent, meaning I talk like a robot, but my programming must be different, as the computer does not hear what my secretary hears, and there were errors.

I will say, however, that this product was much more error free than the IBM, and it may be that I simply need to train more in order to get the hang of the commands and speech cadence.

It may also be that I don't need to try this in a house in which my children and wife, who have no respect for sensitive software, much less my need for quiet solitude, obviously talk, argue, watch tv, play music and ask questions about dinner, all of which is dutifully picked up by the microphone. Sample paragraph: In support of its motion stop that mom he keeps bothering me the defendant jimmy you stop that right now or you'll be grounded moves this court for life summary judgment dear do you want to grill the chicken. . . . (For IBM spies and executives who are reading this, my wife and kids were gone when I tried your product, my dog was in a coma in a corner, and my cats were silently napping on the stairs in the hopes that they could trip me and kill me for having them declawed and neutered--but that's another story).

The software has a mobile feature, which allows you to dictate into a recorder and then have the computer transcribe it. Theoretically, you are not tied to the computer, but I haven't tried this yet, as Dragon suggests that you use the headset to tie into your recorder, and I never have the headset with me when I think about dictating away from the office. (When I'm away from the office the last thing I'm thinking about is dictation, much less having headphones in my pocket). The software is supposed to work with most Windows programs, so it may be quite helpful to a lawyer who avoids E-mail (read Bob Green), because of fear that the keyboard will trap his/her fingers in a death grip, while sucking the money out of the retirement accounts as a secretary laughs hysterically behind his/her back. (Editors note: Bob Green actually has a computer in his office; not at his desk where it would do him or the firm any good, but it's in his office. This is progress.) The learning curve definitely needs to be taken into consideration, as well as the circumstances under which the product is used. If you are in a noisy environment, with constant interruptions, then the product is not going to be of much help.

The software recommends a 200 MHZ processor, but will work on a 133. It needs Windows 98, 95 or NT 4.0. It suggests 64 MB of ram, and takes up 180 MB of space on your hard drive. A sound card is necessary. It retails for about \$180, but is usually discounted. I have not returned this product, and will continue to work on it, as it shows promise.

