

Insanity and the Trials of Voice Dictation Software - *Dragon Naturally Speaking Revisited*

According to Steve Buscemi in the prisoner escape movie, *Con Air*, one definition of insanity is “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Actually, Einstein said that, but I never understood relativity, did not read the book, and heard it from Buscemi before Einstein, so he gets top billing. I thought of this as I once again failed at getting my new voice recognition software, *Dragon Naturally Speaking Version 8*, to work very well on my laptop at home. Fortunately, as you will learn, this quote is somewhat misleading. But hey, I’m a lawyer.

Recall that I tried this software and its competitor, *Via Voice*, several years ago (July 1999), and that I gave up after working all afternoon to dictate an article, with little success. The accuracy was miserable, and the command structure was such that I could have typed what I was trying to do in half the time spent trying to use *Dragon*. I completely rejected the software and technology and have not paid much attention to it since.

Then I recently ran into Andy Owens, who reminded me of my earlier article and suggested that I needed to reconsider. Andy said that *Dragon* had dramatically improved the product over the last several years, and that he was using it exclusively for his writing and dictation of pleadings, correspondence and emails.

Just like Charlie Brown’s desire to kick a football every fall, hope springs eternal. After watching Andy fluidly and accurately dictate emails and correspondence, wirelessly, with nary a secretary in sight, I thought that maybe I should reconsider my earlier rejection of the technology. My interest was further piqued when a couple of days later, I learned that Bob Flynn of Spicer Flynn and Rudstrom was using the technology routinely. Bob talks funny – a lot like me -- so I was even more impressed. And since he and Andy are both geezers in their 50’s and extremely busy, I knew that the technology had to be fairly easy to master or it would not be worth the time and effort. Not to mention that they are extremely cheap, and see a way to cut overhead.... I met with Bob and his office manager, Cathleen Rainey, and found that after a trial run in their Nashville office, the law firm was purchasing the technology for each of its lawyers in all of its offices. That is quite an endorsement.

So I promptly went and purchased the software, and gave it to my partner, Rick Allen, who has yet to open the box. But the red and white box does look very nice on his credenza, and I know when he gets back from Ponte Vedra, where he is playing golf and walking on the beach while the rest of us work our little bones off in our little February arctic cold snap, with bursting pipes and ice everywhere, that he will give it a try. Meanwhile, since I had an article to write, and was clueless as to what to write about, I thought that I should test it and try it again.

The software comes in several versions, Standard (\$100), Preferred (\$200), and Legal(\$800). Andy said that he had used the Preferred edition without any problems, so I opted for that and picked up a copy at Office Depot. The legal edition supposedly has a larger legal vocabulary with Latin and stuff, but since I don't talk like a certain former federal prosecutor with initials "LP" (forgive me Larry), I did not see the need. As the Spicer firm was using it off the shelf with the included microphone, I held back on purchasing a better mike, which Andy had recommended.

The software is easy to install, but it does have some speed and memory requirements. You should be running Windows XP or ME, have a 16 bit sound card, and 512 MB of RAM. Most newer machines purchased in the last 2 years should meet this requirement. It will run on 256MB RAM, but that is pushing the envelope. Setup takes about 20 minutes, and primarily involves teaching the program your voice and how you pronounce words. The product claims that accuracy has improved by 25%, and of course that is critical to whether you will save time or not. You still get a choice of articles to read to the machine, including Dave Barry, as part of the training. Interestingly, the program will scan your documents to "learn" your writing style, which also improves accuracy.

Although I type fairly fast, dictation is always faster than typing. However, on long documents, I tend to forget what I dictated earlier in the document, so typing helps to organize my thoughts as I can see what I have written. But it takes longer. I see the use of Dragon as an opportunity to create documents faster, and to be able to review earlier paragraphs, which keeps me focused. The program allows you to dictate into a recorder as well, and it will type what you dictated.

I typed half of this article, and I used Dragon to create the second half. Once you learn the basic commands, this is a very easy program to use. And even using the included microphone, the program is extremely accurate. I attempted to use the program with e-mail and Web surfing, and ran into a few problems. The program would not type when I dictated a reply to a web accessed email. I checked with support, and learned that there is an easy fix to the problem, which was painless, so I take back everything bad I said about the product three hours ago. No longer do I feel insane for trying the same product again. It really has improved.

For those lawyers who are typing challenged, this program may be a godsend. I am told that one lawyer at the Spicer firm is able to operate and dictate within several programs without touching a mouse or a keyboard. Another lawyer has gone wireless, and walks up and down the hall, mumbling time entries. I recently spoke with a judge who has a broken arm, which happens to be her writing arm, and she sees obvious benefits in trying this program. Given the success that I have had in dictating this article, I'm going to recommend it for our firm as well. Dragon will never take the place of a secretary in my office, as I need memory and organization and someone to pretend I am not at my desk. But it may allow a secretary to handle more attorneys, as the dictation actually creates most of the document and will be a real time saver. Sweet. Go to www.scansoft.com.