

Close your eyes and try to **read** this page



The digital, handheld Bookport



The Victor Reader Classic+



A Vision Australia client using the Victor Reader Classic playback machine

It can't be done. Losing your sense of sight is difficult, but losing access to the world of print-based information at the same time makes it infinitely harder.

This is the reality faced by more than 290 000 Australians who are blind or vision impaired – and since most vision impairment is age-related, this figure is rising fast.

By 2021 it is expected to top 420 000 and even this does not tell the whole story, as a further 17 per cent of our population has a disability that makes it difficult to read printed material – whether it because of a physical problem such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, disability resulting from a stroke, or a perceptual difficulty such as dyslexia.

Because providing access to information is the traditional role of libraries, these figures present a call to action for our entire community. Even today, only 3 per cent of published information in Australia is available in formats accessible to people with a print disability. That's the equivalent of just a couple of the sentences on this page.

Emergent libraries are, however, taking up this challenge – these libraries are digital and collaborative – and the technologies that make these changes possible also present new possibilities for those who have a print disability.

At Vision Australia's Information Library Service, we know that evidence-based information practice and collaboration are the keys to building and future-proofing our services. With a membership that is growing by more than 3000 a year, and already accounting for some 1 000 000 loans per annum, we are at the leading edge of accessible digital information library services.

In 2005, with our clients and their needs at the forefront of our deliberations, we embarked on a project to build a future-proof digital information service. It began with fact-finding and research to ensure that the solutions would offer on-going independence, participation and choice to our members.

Our research confirmed that all the major alternate format libraries in the world were making the move from analogue to a digital service based on the NISO standard DAISY (Digital Information Accessible SYstem), now the internationally recognised format for delivering text with audio. DAISY is at the heart of our digital transition, as it delivers structured content and non-proprietary technologies to access and navigate that content. (See p. 12 for more on DAISY.)

Essential to the development of our strategy was input from clients. To respond to their needs we ran a pilot program that catered for both online users and those preferring a CD-based system.

The online trial featured our 'News on the Go' (NOTG) service – an innovative way of delivering newspapers online. To provide this service, Vision Australia developed software allowing the automated conversion of newspaper text files into DAISY format and the delivery of these files online.

Clients were able to download the digital newspaper files and to access them via a hand-held device, the Bookport™, which has a built-in text-to-speech facility. The delivery process takes only minutes and the newspapers are typically available for download by 2:30am, well before the printed version is published.

Using the portable device, clients are able to 'read' the daily newspapers on the train, in the garden or in a café just as a sighted reader would, and to navigate with the same amount of ease, jumping straight to the section they desire, browsing headlines and only reading the articles that appeal to them.

This online service caters to a small but growing membership that is technologically advanced and demanding new solutions. The participants for the CD trial, in contrast, represented the overwhelming majority of people over 75 years of age in our client base.

The DAISY format CD books enable people who are blind, vision impaired or have another form of print disability to read standard print, browse through the contents of a book and to use the table of contents and index in much the same way as a sighted reader. These books can be read on a computer with DAISY software or on a portable player, much like a regular CD player.

For the CD trial Vision Australia chose the Victor Reader Classic+ and the Plectalk PTN1 digital playback devices.

Because the portable players remember the last listening location in each of the last 999 books, the reader can swap between books with absolute freedom, and – unlike regular audio books which often required upwards of a dozen compact discs – a transition to DAISY CD means that a sample title now fits on just one CD with room left for several additional books.

In future Vision Australia will also be offering access to audio books online: users will be able to search our online library catalogue, select books and then download them via computer to their handheld or portable devices.

Our feedback proved that people loved the audio quality, the ease of use, and the convenience of receiving an entire book in just one small parcel capable of fitting into a standard size mail box.

The total sum of this research, client feedback and development work is embodied in i-access, a revolutionary initiative that will change in the way Australians who are blind or vision impaired will obtain and use information.

To fully utilise this powerful technology this project will deliver three major outcomes:

1. A digitised book catalogue converting the current analogue catalogue to digital and the production and sourcing of new titles. We will offer 8000 DAISY titles by the end of 2007.
2. Free digital playback devices replacing the current cassette tape playback devices, as well as providing the necessary training and support for new users. By June 2007 we will have distributed thousands of DAISY format digital playback devices free-of-charge to our clients.

3. In-house online storage and delivery capabilities: this includes services such as online course materials, newspapers and magazines. It involved acquiring the necessary hardware for the storage of the digital information service with 35 terabytes of SAN (building to 100), as well as development of the supporting software.

At Vision Australia we are building a service not just for part of our community but for all our community, where 100 per cent of published information is available in accessible formats, and delivered not just on two devices, but on a range of devices, according to client choice.

Through evidence-based practice, collaboration and partnering we are creating the terrain upon which the service of the future will rest.

**Rebecca Herrington, National Manager,
Vision Australia Information Service**

ph 03 9864 9604 e-mail

Rebecca.Herrington@visionaustralia.org



Two young Vision Australia clients, Prue Watt and Dawson Ko, with a DAISY player and the Victor Reader Classic model



The Plectalk PTN1 digital playback device



The Libraries Australia Record Import Service supports:

- Easy contribution of your library's bibliographic records and holdings to the Australian National Bibliographic Database
- Flexible cataloguing workflows
- A variety of data formats including MARC 21 and Inmagic DB/Textworks
- Bibliographic records containing non-roman scripts

Libraries that contribute bibliographic records and holdings to the ANBD receive discounts on the price of their Libraries Australia subscription.

For more information: www.nla.gov.au/librariesaustralia

