

Glasgow Housing Association – integrating screen to text reading application with Visualfiles

The Glasgow Housing Association Limited (GHA), Europe's largest social landlord managing 80,000 tenancies, recently won a LexisNexis Visualfiles Best Use of Visualfiles Innovation Award 2006 for its innovative thinking combined with a proactive approach to problem solving by working effectively and collaboratively as a team to find a solution which has enabled a blind team member, Phyllis, to become an empowered user of the Visualfiles application.

GHA is an in-house legal team providing a range of services to sixty three local housing organisations and to internal corporate departments to support the work of the largest registered social landlord in the UK. Using more recently Visualfiles and previously SolCase from LexisNexis Visualfiles, GHA has achieved significant time savings, improved service quality, more cost effective services and operational cost savings. Julia Henderson, Head of Legal at GHA comments *"Visualfiles has revolutionised our business and is integral to the management of our work streams and to the delivery of efficient and effective legal advice and support across the business. Due to the flexibility and user friendly development environment of Visualfiles, we have successfully designed and developed applications to match our many varied areas of work."*

The Challenge

During the course of GHA's recent upgrade from SolCase to Visualfiles, it was identified that Phyllis, one of its business support officers, was unable to navigate her way around Visualfiles as well as she had been able to when using SolCase. Phyllis had previously been able to navigate SolCase without any difficulty as she had been using a match up with the Freedom Scientific software Jaws 4.1. (a screen to text reading application that identifies elements on screen and effectively reads these to the user as she navigates around the screen). This presented a challenge for GHA's developers.

The Search for a Solution

While there are a number of screen to text reading applications currently available, GHA, supported by its in-house ICT team and the LexisNexis Visualfiles development team, decided, with Phyllis, to evaluate four applications taking two crucial factors into consideration throughout the evaluation:

- Improved navigation and element identification within Visualfiles.

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- Improved integration with Microsoft Office (particularly Outlook and Word). This would greatly improve the communication ability and overall use of Visualfiles.

The ultimate aim was to ensure that Phyllis would be able to use Visualfiles to the same level as the other members of the legal team.

The four tested applications were:

HAL by Dolphin: While successful in reading the text displayed on the screen when navigating between screens and menus using the mouse, when an attempt was made to perform known functions within Visualfiles using only the keyboard, problems were encountered. HAL appeared to use a different set of control keys, greatly increasing the learning curve that Phyllis would face if this product was selected.

SuperNova by Dolphin: This application uses the same interface as HAL but adds a magnification element to the display. However, it assumes that a magnified visual display will be of benefit. Magnification would not benefit Phyllis. The keyboard control set was identical to HAL and would again increase the learning curve that Phyllis would face.

Windows Eyes: The Windows Eyes evaluation provided a very limited screen to speech application. It did not read elements including menus effectively within Visualfiles. It was clear by Phyllis' reaction that this application did not meet her requirements and would not improve on her current situation (using Jaws 4).

Jaws 7.1 by Freedom Scientific: This application was the latest upgrade of Phyllis' current application, Jaws 4. Instantly it was clear that the keyboard control set was very similar as the Jaws application relayed information back with ease. The control set appeared to work as expected with a very small learning curve.

The aim was to complete a number of set tasks within Visualfiles that had already been identified as known problem areas. These tasks could not even be attempted with all three previously tested applications. The Jaws 7.1 evaluation allowed Phyllis to successfully complete these tasks. These tasks tested that the application could

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navigate through selected menus and ensured that she could complete all required role related tasks within Visualfiles. Jaws 7.1 has a configuration manager with hundreds of user specific settings, ensuring that the application could be set up specifically to meet all user requirements, including what the application read and how information was identified and read to the user.

By process of elimination, Jaw 7.1 represented the ideal solution! It was clear from the evaluation that it was the most suitable application for Phyllis' requirements and for Visualfiles. The keyboard control set played a very significant role in the evaluation. Phyllis had to be able to adopt the keyboard control easily. When using Supernova and HAL she felt uneasy when the application did not respond to the keyboard control set that she had mastered over the last 10 years. Jaws 7.1 integrated very well with Visualfiles and the application overcame all difficulties that Jaws 4.1 suffered from by providing excellent navigational instructions within Visualfiles. It was also clear that Microsoft Office 2003 integrated much better with this new version of Jaws.

The Result

Working as a team, GHA was able to identify and implement a solution which has enabled Phyllis to use all aspects of Visualfiles, including following workflow, running actions, producing documents, choosing from menus and all ad-hoc actions from within the system. The integration of a specialist application for blind users (Jaws 7.1 by Freedom Scientific) with Visualfiles enables Phyllis to perform a much increased range of support functions as compared to the tasks she was able to perform before the implementation of SolCase and latterly Visualfiles.

Julia comments *"Phyllis has confirmed that she is now navigating Visualfiles with ease. Having been anxious when she first encountered the difficulties in using Visualfiles she is now comfortable as a result of the integration. Importantly Phyllis has been empowered by the introduction of Visualfiles (and formerly SolCase) into the legal team and the range of functions which she can carry out has increased significantly improving her working experience and the productivity of our team. Phyllis, only 3 years away from retirement, now feels valued and capable. She also feels like a member of the team for the first time in her working life."*

Phyllis sums it up:

"I have gained new skills and independence." - Phyllis Hamill, Legal Business Support Officer

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