

# CATP 2000 Report

11/17/2000

By Andy Gorman

I attended Cathy Bodine's conference down in Denver last week. I was really impressed with a few of the groups I met. The three groups that stick out in my mind are 1) AbleLink Technologies, 2) Parent to Parent of Colorado, and 3) ItsNever2Late.com. I will briefly describe the things I found interesting about these groups.

## **AbleLink Technologies Inc.**

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AbleLink Technologies is doing some great work in researching and developing applications for people with cognitive disabilities. Their name may seem familiar; I know that Stefan has been in contact with them.

They have developed several applications for the Windows CE platform. These are typically prompting systems that provide task support for people with cognitive disabilities.

In addition to all of their hand-held apps, they also have a dozen or so apps for the desktop. The most interesting ones are the Voyager Desktop, a simplified desktop interface; WebTrek, a simplified browser; and an email client that has yet to be named, but that will be released in the first quarter of '01.

AbleLink does a great deal of research and product testing, so I think it would behoove us to look at what they are doing. I spoke with the president Dan Davies and some of the engineers about the email client. It looks strikingly similar to i-mail. It is picture-based, as far as selecting people from an address book by photos. But for message content, they were looking at recorded voice message and screen readers. It is still unclear exactly how it will work because it is still under development. However, they have done a lot of user testing and eliminated many bad design alternatives. We should not ignore what they have learned.

They also have a schedule assistant for the desktop that integrates with their hand-held apps to create an environment much like the Visions system. I know

that Stefan has been looking into this, so he knows what differentiates his work, but last week was the first time I saw their desktop apps. I think we need to be careful not to reinvent the wheel here.

I'm trying to arrange with Cathy for the AbleLink people to come to Boulder so we can all see first hand what they are up to. I think we should be collaborating with this group or have the Coleman Initiative funding them, but they are an independently owned and operated company so I'm not sure what kind of arrangement we can work out. They have over 10 years in the business so I don't think we can (or would even want to) compete with that experience.

It's fine to differentiate our work from theirs, but so far I'm not sure that's happening. Hopefully this is just because of my own ignorance (i.e., there may be distinctions of which I am not aware). The one big problem I see with their stuff is that it is not cross platform. It is all Windows-based (including Windows CE). We are already aware of the problems where kids have Macs in the classroom and PCs at home: they're not able to have a consistent environment as they switch between the two. This question was briefly raised at the conference during the AbleLink presentation with a comment from a teacher like, "But we all have Macs in our classrooms." Maybe this will be our niche.

AbleLink is under-funded. They work primarily off of grants. I don't think they're making much from sales yet. This means that they have many dead projects--projects that ended in the prototype stage. I'm not sure if we can help them with their situation. It seem like they need development, not research.

I'll keep you informed as things progress. In the meantime you can check out their web site, if haven't already, at <http://www.ablelinktech.com>

## **Parent to Parent of Colorado**

### ***Contact Information:***

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This is a parent's support group. They maintain a database of parents of children with disabilities. Their goal is to help establish a kind of "big brother" / "big sister" relationship between parents in similar circumstances. The common scenario would be that a parent who learns that their child has condition x would call Parent to Parent and describe their situation. The representative would develop a profile, which would then be entered into their database and hopefully matched with other parents with similar circumstances who are geographically close in proximity.

The point has been raised within our group that when the condition is rare and the population is sparse, there is little chance of finding someone close in proximity that shares your condition. The opportunity to support this community by breaking down geographical barriers is great. The work in “Experience Journals” could perhaps relax the process of developing formal family profiles and allow parents to directly establish relationships, instead of being forced to operate through a broker like Parent to Parent. It is not entirely clear that this is even desirable, but it is certainly worth look at. Instead of looking to eliminate Parent to Parent, it probably make more sense to see if we can enhance their services. The woman I spoke with seemed very interested in the possibility of working with us.

## **It's Never 2 Late**

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This company is an ISP with a niche. They target assisted living communities for seniors. Their goal is to set seniors up with internet access and training. They have used the AbleLink products (see above) because of their simple, easy-to-use design. Cathy Bodine introduced me to Jack so I think it's worth taking a look at what they do.

We have often recognized the similarities between the senior and cognitively disabled communities. Seniors move into assisted living communities for many reasons. It may simply be for companionship or perhaps because they are at risk due to physical frailty, but it can also be due to the diminished cognitive ability that can be associated with aging (e.g., decreased memory abilities or the more acute problem of people with Alzheimer disease). When we look for the “space program effect” in our work, we should keep in mind the similarities between these two communities.