

Technology

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- **DragonDictate 7.0: Good Product from a Questionable Company**
- **"Mirroring" Backup Software**

I first wrote about voice recognition software in *The Scrivener* in the Summer 1994 issue, nine years ago. In those nine years, Statistics Canada says the cost of living has gone up by more than 20 percent, and Vancouver housing has become the most expensive in the country. Yet the cost of top-of-the-line voice recognition software has fallen from \$1500 to \$100.

Ya gotta love technology.

The latest incarnation of DragonDictate software, version 7.0, was released in late March. It is noticeably more accurate than its predecessor, and accuracy is the name of the game, after all. If you constantly have to go back to correct things, what's the point? After about a month of use, I find that the new version gives me two or three errors per page rather than the six to eight I was getting with version 6.0. The company is claiming a 15 percent increase in accuracy, but it feels like more to me.

DragonDictate software started 19 years ago in Newton, Massachusetts, when Janet and Jim Baker and their Dragon Systems Inc. brought out a 1000-word dictation product. By 1997, the software had a vocabulary of 230,000

words. The company's sales hit almost US\$70 million in 1998. But sales slumped in 1999 and the Bakers sold out to Flemish competitors Lernout & Hauspie in March of 2000, getting little in cash and a lot of L&H shares.

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Nevertheless the future of voice recognition still looked bright. Microsoft even invested in Lernout & Hauspie and included speech recognition as a standard feature in Windows XP.

But shortly before Christmas of 2000, Lernout & Hauspie admitted it had overstated sales, was placed under SEC supervision, and filed for bankruptcy. The future of DragonDictate was in limbo and, for those of us who rely on the software, it was a stressful time. John P. Dalton, an analyst at Forrester Research Inc. in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said, "The

[voice recognition] industry remains a legacy of disappointments, uncertain demand, and lackluster reliability."

Lernout & Hauspie's biggest asset was a staff of more than 1000 computational linguists and software engineers. The linguists, in particular, were—and are—in scarce supply.

Now ScanSoft Inc. of Peabody, Massachusetts, has purchased the rights to DragonDictate from the bankruptcy trustee. According to Dragon Systems founder Janet Baker, however, few of the original Dragon engineers went along with it. "To make serious improvement for the future," she says, "will take the best and brightest minds."

Well, as far as I can tell, enough of the engineers went along to make a serious improvement in the latest version of DragonDictate. I like it and I'll keep buying it.

That said, I have to take issue with two of ScanSoft's policies.

First, as a registered user of version 6.0, I received a promotional mailing offering me the opportunity to buy version 7.0 at a discount. The regular

price of DragonDictate Preferred version 7.0 was going to be US\$199—about CAN\$300—they told me but, just because I was a nice guy and a regular customer, if I ordered by March 31, they would let me have it for half that, plus shipping, of course. Add it all up and it came to about CAN\$180.

I walked into Costco in early April and found it for CAN\$150.

I don't like being misled.

Second, their support policies leave something to be desired. You get one free support call—you pay the long-distance—and after that, they cost US\$20 each. You can try their online knowledgebase but good luck if your question is the least bit obscure, as mine was. They also say they have communities of users where you can ask others how they solve similar problems. They seem to have them for all their products *except* DragonDictate.

Can I send them an email with my problem? Fat chance.

They do say on the Website that, if you call with a problem that is not in their knowledgebase, they won't charge you. I say, make very sure you search carefully.

Together these are two very serious deficiencies. The first indicates a basic dishonesty that I find disturbing, the second an unwillingness to assist the very customers who will, in the long run, ensure the success of the business.

I rely on another ScanSoft product, PaperPort, which I have used for several years as an electronic filing system. Rather than keep physical files, I scan things to my hard drive and eventually write them to CD ROMs. I am, however, reconsidering my relationship with the company at this point.

I love both software products, but I don't know if I like the company anymore.

Another topic on which I love to harp is backup, backup, backup.

I know. I'm a nag. But one of these days, one of you is going to send me a letter and tell me that I saved your business, and that will make it all worthwhile.

And that's what we're talking about here: nothing less than the survival of your business. Statistics show that the length of time it takes to get a business up and running after a disaster is inversely proportional to the survival rate of that business. In other words, the longer it takes you to get up and running, the less likely you are to survive. Businesses that take two weeks to get back in operation rarely make it.

If your main hard drive—the one containing all your financial records, client data, precedents, and contact data built up over a lifetime—crashed right now—at this very moment—what would you do? How long would it take you to be back in business?

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It would take me 5 minutes.

After a long search, I have finally found software that allows me to “mirror” one hard drive to another. That means that any time anything is written to my C: drive, it is also written to my D: drive. Delete something from C: and it is deleted from D:. In other words, the two disk drives are identical.

If my C: drive crashed right now, after this word, you would never know because I would merely turn off my computer, open up the case, pull the cables off my C: drive, move a small jumper on my D: drive to make it now the primary or C: drive, and go back to work. At the end of the day, I'd remove the failed drive and take it to the shop to see what could be salvaged, if anything.

Mirroring is a tactic that large corporations have used for years but, until recently, mirroring software has not been available for PCs. The particular product I use is called MirrorFolder from Techsoft Pvt. Ltd. You can use it to mirror a few directories or an entire drive, as I am doing. It works entirely in the background and uses very little memory.

You can download a free 30-day trial version of the software from the company's Website at <http://www.techsoftpl.com/backup/index.htm>. If you decide to buy, it is only US\$19.95 for a single computer licence.

By the way, my experience with this company has been fantastic. I had a highly technical question regarding hard drive issues that I won't go into here. Both Microsoft and even Symantec/Norton, which made the software that caused the problem, blew me off. Techsoft got back to me with a courteous email within hours with exactly the solution I needed. And it wasn't even really their problem!

I still use a backup program daily, and still send CDs off-site every month with copies of all my critical files. I could have a fire or a break-in, but for most purposes, MirrorFolder provides the protection I need.

Remember, backup *every* day, without exception.

Note: the source for much of the background information re. DragonDictate is an article in the September 9, 2002, issue of *Business Week*, page 64: “PCs and Speech: a Rocky Marriage,” by Faith Keenan. ▲

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