

Turn Talk Into Type!

By JoAnn Hathaway

Since its opening in 2006, the Practice Management Resource Center (PMRC) has sought to excel in providing practice management resources to SBM members and their staff. With continued emphasis on outreach, your PMRC team is pleased to introduce "Law Practice Solutions," a new Michigan Bar Journal column focused on providing solutions to practice and risk management issues facing today's lawyer.

We look forward to providing this service to you and hope you enjoy our debut article!

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What if you could pick up a microphone, whenever and wherever you choose, and create an "on the spot" quality work product ready for dissemination? It might be something as simple as an e-mail or a short memo, or as complex as a brief. With the continued improvements made in already respectable versions of VRS, this is an easily attainable goal.

Versatility at its Best

VRS is no respecter of persons. Its functionality and usability is as broad-scoped for the solo practitioner as it is for the large-firm lawyer or support staff. The beauty of a standalone product like VRS is that it allows users to create as little or as much as desired. Some days, I rely totally on my voice recognition solution, while other days, I don't use it at all. I like the versatility and freedom to choose.

The Players

There are many versions of speech-to-text transcription software available. A popular choice is Dragon NaturallySpeaking,¹ from Nuance Communications, Inc., with a recent release of version 10. Its previously anemic competition is now much healthier. With some major competitors, the playing field has substantially broadened. Even so, Dragon remains a major VRS force with several editions from which to choose, including Standard, Preferred, Professional, Legal, and Medical.

Expect a wide price variance depending on your edition choice, ranging from \$99 to over \$1,000. From my discussions with many beginners, a price/performance sweet spot seems to be the Preferred Edition at approximately \$199. However, many have

found that upgrading to the Legal Edition is a wise investment.

The functionality of each edition broadens when moving up the price chain, as would be expected. Powerful features in Legal Edition 10 include a preconfigured legal vocabulary with over 30,000 legal-specific terms and phrases, and the ability to format legal citations. It creates custom voice commands to instantly build and format templates for contracts or other legal documents or automate complex tasks with a spoken word or phrase. It advertises improved third-party correction features to streamline the editing and correction process, dramatically decreasing turnaround time and dependencies on support staff.

Regardless of your VRS choice, be aware that this software requires plenty of "muscle," so verify system requirements before making a purchase.

User Benefits

In addition to some of the more obvious reasons to consider investing in VRS, Nuance lists the following:

- Ease of use. A purchase includes on-screen tutorials and requires no script reading, with usability out of the box.
- A high level of accuracy with voice-to-text, while creating contracts, briefs, e-mails, and more.
- Decreased document production time, equating to increased efficiency and more productive use of time.
- Reduced dependency on support staff and elimination of downtime.
- The ability to incorporate document production in the world of mobile lawyering with remote synchronization or voice-to-text on a PC.

Uttering commands to our computers and having them respond has been a wish for users since the computer age began. Because this technology was slow to evolve, few may realize that it has long since arrived.

Over the years, many lawyers have come to associate voice recognition software (VRS) with unfriendly single-use solutions and related user hassles. I've spoken to many lawyers who recall colleagues from the 1990s flaunting their new speech recognition gadget, only to spend hours trying to get a single sentence right.

As a result, many continue to relegate VRS to its previously well-deserved seat in the back, continuing with the general population's "group think"—that it isn't worth much. The time has come to sit up and pay attention.

- Full network compatibility, allowing access to user profiles from any PC on an organization's local area network.
- The ability to perform complex, multi-step tasks with a single command using shortcuts.
- The flexibility to dictate, edit, and navigate menus from Microsoft® Office, Corel® WordPerfect,™ and virtually any Windows application, as well as many favorite practice management applications.

A Word of Caution

VRS does not misspell words. Although a spell checker will rarely uncover a misspelled word, VRS may translate the spoken word to a word that *sounds like* the dictated word. Therefore, proofreading is imperative when using voice-to-text software. Nothing drives the point home as well as a good example; consider the following excerpt from "Owed Two A Spell Chequer"²:

Eye halve a spelling chequer
It came with my pea sea
It plainly marques four my revue
Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.

So, to ensure a quality end product and minimize liability exposure, effective proofreading is a necessity.

When revising a document, out of habit, most people start keying the necessary changes. With VRS, it's best to take the time to make changes by speaking them and offering commands. This trains the software to recognize your voice and speaking pattern, with its unique style and intonations. Failure to do so will likely result in the same recognition mistakes the next time you use the software.

It Gets Even Better

Consider this: you can become even more productive by coupling VRS with digital dictation.

For the last 30 years, cassette-based desktop dictation machines and portable handheld cassette recorders using mini cassette tapes have dominated the market. Not surprisingly, many firms have failed to install

digital dictation systems, even though they offer huge productivity gains, greater efficiency for support staff, and improved service for clients.

Using digital dictation technology, lawyers can dictate and then immediately route the dictation to support staff 24/7 from any location in the world. With cassette-based transcription, a lawyer must be physically present to pass tapes to a transcriptionist. This limitation drastically reduces both the incentive and value of dictating remotely. Digital dictation is easy to implement, with numerous capturing options. These options include cell phones, which can be easily equipped with digital dictation software.

By using VRS *and* digital dictation, a lawyer can dictate remotely and send the dictation directly to home base, where it

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can be transcribed, hands-free, with VRS. A transcriptionist can listen to the recording to proof the document, ensuring that the end product comports with the dictation.

Of course, this second layer of involvement can be done onsite without the aid of digital dictation. Some believe that the real benefit comes from implementing a digital dictation workflow solution with integrated speech recognition, taking into account the entire document creation process and simplifying the transcription of dictation.

Keyboarding Versus Dictation

Even if you don't dictate, how fast can you key? Developers for Nuance's Dragon NaturallySpeaking claim the average typist today enters 35 words a minute with 58 percent accuracy. While this seems a bit low from my experience, Dragon still has

the 100 word-per-minute typist beat with its newest version 10 release, claiming it improves accuracy over its predecessor by 20 percent and that it converts speech to text at speeds of up to 160 words per minute. Nuance further claims that Dragon accurately converts what it hears up to 99 percent of the time.

Consider this example:

- Minutes per day composing typed documentation: 35
- Composition typing rate: 20 words per minute
- Words composed in 60 minutes: 1,200
- Dictation rate: 200 words per minute
- Time to dictate 1,200 word composition: 6 minutes
- Time saved: 54 minutes per day
- Work days per year: 260
- Time saved per year per staff member, now available for billable tasks: 234 hours (260 days x 54 minutes/day)

In this example, billing at a rate of \$150 per hour, one timekeeper would have the ability to bill \$35,100 more per annum.

Conclusion

If you want to save time, earn more money, and experience "keyboard liberation," consider purchasing voice recognition software. With a little patience and proper usage, you'll soon consider your purchase a wise investment. ■

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FOOTNOTES

1. Discussion of Dragon NaturallySpeaking transcription software does not constitute a guarantee or warranty of the product or an endorsement over other software products not mentioned.
2. Author unknown. Please note that this example was not dictated by voice recognition software.