



Lab Impressions

Two cool ideas on assistive technology from IDEAS

- By [Trudy Walsh](#)
- Oct 06, 2009

At the [IDEAS](#) conference in Washington yesterday, the GCN Lab took note of the latest assistive technology aimed at government users. IDEAS, which stands for Interagency Disability Educational Awareness Showcase, focuses on industry, education and government working together to meet the requirements under sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Two of the assistive products on display caught our eye: [NetCentric's CommonLook PDF Accessibility Wizard](#) (PAW) for Microsoft Office and [sComm's UbiDuo face-to-face communication device](#).

NetCentric's Ferass EIRayes, vice president of R&D, demonstrated the PAW software for us, putting a Word document into PDF format. The PAW program walks you through the accessibility features like a spell check. You don't need to know anything about 508 requirements, as they are already coded into the software. You click on "save as accessible PDF," and it will check the areas that might pose an obstacle for accessibility, such as an image that doesn't have an alternative text rendering. It also works with any screenreader such as JAWS and sells for a GSA price of \$100.

We're particularly interested in assistive devices for the deaf and hard of hearing in the GCN Lab. A few years ago, when the Lab's office was near [Gallaudet University](#) in Washington, I used to watch fascinated as the Gallaudet students waited for the campus shuttle bus. One thing that amazed me was how they all "talked" at once, and nobody seemed to mind being interrupted. I spoke with John Effinger, director of sales, for sComm, and he said that this was partly because of the nature of sign language. It's so visual that space is more important than time in the communication process. Signers don't experience this sense of simultaneous talking from multiple communicators as an interruption. It's all part of the flow of the signing dialogue.

The UbiDuo recreates that same simultaneous communication used by the deaf community. The six-pound, notebook-sized device enables deaf, hard of hearing and hearing people to communicate with each other by typing simultaneous messages. There's no waiting or complicated setup as there would be to type a standard instant message. You just give the person you want to communicate with one half of the notebook-sized device and he or she can start typing away. Both users can type at the same time, and the display will show simultaneously what each person is typing.

About the Author

Trudy Walsh is a senior writer for GCN.