



Board Views

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The Digital Barrier

Some of you may have noticed that the name of this column has changed. Formerly it was known as “Board Bytes,” but some people felt that the term “Byte” presented an image of a nasty, ferocious, mean Board which is always biting at the heels of staff members (smile). In an effort to correct that image, we have changed the title to “Board Views” in hopes that this will present a more accurate image of its contents and Board/staff relationships. I hope that you find the name change agreeable.

Last fall I was offered the position of Executive Director of the Missouri Commission for the Deaf, and the opportunity to work full-time on behalf of people who are deaf or hard of hearing. After much soul searching, I retired from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and accepted the job here in Missouri. The time since then has been full of many challenges, not the least of which have been concerned with upgrading the office telephone system and making it fully accessible for all staff members. While doing so, several situations arose which again remind me of why TDI is so important.

First, for a variety of reasons I wanted my staff to move from desktop TTY’s to computer-based TTY’s. Doing so would free up some space on our desktops and allow us to save TTY conversations as computer files, which could then easily be manipulated, edited, forwarded to relevant parties, attached to e-mail, and so forth. The computer-based TTY’s would also provide many other positive features which are not available in desktop TTY’s, such as phone number directories of effectively unlimited size, split screen separation of incoming and outgoing conversations, the ability to save conversations in different folders, and so on. Simply stated, it was time to switch to computer-based TTY’s in the office. There was one small problem, however. Our office telephone system is a digital system, and there are no computer-based TTY programs that will work on digital systems.

Next, I wanted to install appropriate signaling devices for my deaf and hard of hearing staff members. I wanted everyone to know when the phone was ringing, not just my hearing employees. Oops, the “digital barrier” rears its ugly head again. There apparently are no signaling systems (flashing lights) that will work on digital phone systems.

Furthermore, I really like the advantages that a system like NXi Text Services has to offer for an office with many incoming and outgoing TTY calls. Such a system would allow for automated call routing, individual mailboxes for TTY messages, intra-office person-to-person text calls, conversion of TTY messages to e-mail or fax messages, internal text call conferencing, placement of incoming text calls via the internet, and so forth. But the “digital barrier” pops up again. The NTS system does not work on digital phone systems.

And of course when I went to get cell phones for my staff members who travel a lot, I again encountered the “digital barrier.” Generally speaking, only analog cell phones are TTY compatible. And even then people who are deaf or hard of hearing have to buy and carry extra equipment in order to make things work.

The point of all this is simply to remind everyone that advances in technology (for example, analog to digital telephony) all too often represent but unrealized dreams and de facto telecommunication barriers for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. And it is for that reason, if none other, that TDI must maintain a visible presence and an active set of hands (loud voice) in the politics of our nation’s capitol. Manufacturers of telecommunication technology must always be reminded that the blessings of their new and emergent technologies are not always “blessings” to everyone, but rather constitute little more than new communication “barriers” and sources of frustration for many people - such as is the case with digital technologies and people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Let’s hope that there is always a vigilant TDI to represent the interests of people with hearing loss before the FCC, other governmental agencies, industry forums, and Congressional committees. If we don’t want left out of all decisions affecting our telecommunications technology choices, we must be ready and willing to take our seat at the policy making tables - and that’s exactly what TDI does for us. It provides a much needed voice in its constant efforts to promote full access to telecommunications and media for all people with hearing loss. **SK**