

A story of determination

By Michael Micallef

I started my working career on 5th May 1987 as a Telephone Operator/Receptionist at the Malta Government Computer Center (GCC) at Swatar Dingli. Just nine months after I lost my sight once for ever.

My working experience at GCC was a very pleasant one. I made a lot of good friends and a few of them are still working with us at MITTS.

Young and determined to work and succeed, I soon learned how to Operate the PABX telephone system. I asked someone to read me the whole list of telephone extensions, and then I made the same list manually in Braille so I could study them on my own. I had around 100-120 extensions to learn and memorize.

Almost two years later, one day in the afternoon, I was sitting quietly in the reception and started thinking about my job as a telephone operator. I realised that this kind of job was rapidly declining in popularity. I also realised that the majority of the Maltese blind people are working as PABX operators or in the caim work. I thought that this was impossible situation that everyone does the same job and I start thinking about something new.

The GCC where I was working, naturally was surrounded with computers and before I lost my vision completely I read about talking computers for the blind and how the blind start getting new jobs through the use of talking computers, including jobs such as programmers, computer operators, and even secretaries.

The first thing I done was that in my breaktime I went to the Registry Room, and asked one of the employees to describe me what he does to operate the computer and what happens when he perform certain computer functions. So I realised more and more that I with a talking computer can perform a lot of tasks.

I decided to take the plunge, I made an appointment with theManager Mr. E. Camilleri and he directed me to continue develop the project with Mr. Frank Abdilla. The first thing I was requested by Mr. Abdilla was to gather as much as I can information from abroad how the system works. I was fortunate enough that before I lost my vision I just sat for the London Chamber of Commerce in commercial typing exams and got distinguish certificate. This helped me a lot because with my typewriter although i had no speech but with my good typing skills I can write abroad and get what I want.

To cut a long story short, the process of getting the information, evaluation, ordering, and the actual installation of the equipment it took about one whole year.

In fact I just start using the first talking speech synthesizer that ever came in Malta on 1st November 1990. In those days Mr. Eugenio Ciappara was responsible to install the necessary hardware and software. In fact the synthesizer we bought was the "Type 'N Talk" and the speech system was "Verbal Operating System" (VOS), and this speech system was installed on an Amstrad model 1512, 4mhz computer, with just 64KB of memory. When I heard the speech synthesizer talks for the first time on that date of 1/11/1990, I almost collapse because the speech was so robotic that it was very hard to understand unless you train your ears to get used to it. In fact my working colleagues manage to understand what the speech was saying because they start compare the screen contents. I also spent the first two months like a kid just typing the words eg: "doctor" and learn how the speech pronounce "doctor".

Also soon I realised that the hardware and software alone was not enough, I was need some basic books in accessible format, primarily in Braille so I can study on my own. So I start hunting again for the information, and finally found what I want. This time my managers approach the KNPD for some assistance because the books I want was very expensive. And the KNPD kindly sponsor me the book "comprehensive Computer Studies" by Peter Bishop, this book in Braille had 13 volumes to read. I took approximately two years to study this book and prepare for the University of Oxford exams. Finally the exams arrived and past, and I got "A Level" in computer studies.

In that period when I sat for the exams in 1993, there was the migration period from GCC at Swatar Dingli to theMITTS building formerly known as (management Systems Unit MSU).

In 1994, I joined with the MSU Helpdesk Department and now my new Manager was Mr. Michael Balzan. My primary responsability in this new department was to answer phone queries about computer problems especially about the MS-DOS operating system because by that time I became almost expert on it. Also in that time I had to overcome another problem, and this time was the "windows Environment". The main problem was that the GUI environment was developing so fast that the companies who specialise in adaptive equipment for the disabled especially for us the blind, found it very hard to keep the pace. In fact in those days there was only just one screen reader available for windows 3.1, and it was Slimware Window Bridge produced by a Canadian company called Syntha Voice. Unfortunately this particular screenreader was very difficult to learn but I manage to learn enough so at least I can manage the windows environment, but still many off-the-shelf programmms were still not supported yet. Also few months after I joined the Helpdesk Department, the manager bought me an embosser so I can work more efficiently by producing those important notes in Braille, because we the blind like sighted people, often need to refer to the printed material for reference, but instead of inkprint it is in our Braille system.

If someone asks me if the Braille is still relevant for today's world especially when you consider the great advancement made in today's access technology I answer Yes, Braille is still relevant and still important because if the electricity fails you need another means how to write a simple telephone number, and this is just an example.

Back to my work, soon I start realising that I cannot cope enough with the windows environment because the idea of "accessibility for all" wasn't grip enough grounds By that time.

So I developed the idea that with collaboration with MSU , KNPD and ETC, forming the Communications Information Technology Accomodation (CITA). The idea was to start providing training to the other disabled persons especially the blind in Malta. In fact Mr Ivan Carabot was appointed to start develop the project. The CITA was founded in 1997.

In 2000, the CITA was replaced by the Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA). With the new foundation my work increased because now apart from the training blind and VI, support and translation of braille documents, I also start evaluating websites and software for accessibility.

In July 2003, in collaboration with the Leonardo Project I attending a course for trainers provided by the British Computer Association for the Blind and this one week course took place in Coventry. Then the next week I moved to Birmingham where I attended for the Sight Village exhibition, one of the yearly largest accessible technology fairs in Europe. I encourage everyone that if he ever got the opportunity visit this Access Technology because he/she can learn a lot

Since CITA setup until today's date, I trained over 60 blind and VI persons. Obviously, not all these individuals continue make use from the computer, but the majority continue expand their knowledge along the time. I also gave substantial numerous amount of demonstrations both at GCC Swatar and here at MITTS.

Further awareness and education especially amongst the employers is needed because in my career I met with at least two cases where employee lose his sight and finish loose his job because he and his employer doesn't know how the modern technology could assist him in his new situation.

Another Idea that I frequently insist about it and I'm pleased to say that it is one of the FITA's current initiatives, is the pooling of the second hand computers to those disabled persons who couldn't afford to buy the latest brand new computers. My present Manager Mr. Stanley Debono is working hard also to continue push forward this project, apart from other projects which form part from the FITA's services umbrella.

Before I conclude this article, I wish also say thanks to Mr Saviour Cachia and other persons (it is impossible to mention everyone), for their encouragement and contribution towards the success of my career.

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