

sequel

deaf telecoms update

Text telecoms survey what deaf people say and do

The results of the most comprehensive, independent study of deaf people's use of text telecoms in the UK have just been released.

Deaf people seem to be much more up-to-date with telecoms technologies than previously thought. Their desire for mainstream technology is clear, but there is frustration with organizations that often won't adapt to slightly different modes of communication.

Email, SMS (text messaging on mobile phones) and textphones are now the most popular modes of text telephone communication – and in that order.

The Internet has really taken off in the homes of deaf people where 73% of the sample had access – compared to only 48% of the general population. Until now, it was generally thought that deaf people were reluctant to embrace the Net. That situation certainly seems to have changed, but the survey probably over-emphasized the trend because it tended to better represent the younger and more affluent in the deaf communities.

However, some of the more recent text innovations are little used or understood. Instant Messaging on the Internet, which would appear to be very suited to deaf people, is used by very few.

SMS has taken off in a big way and in fact emerged as the preferred mode of telecoms if users were limited to a single method of text communication. Much of the popularity of SMS stems from the fact that it is a mainstream technology that can be used anywhere – even if delays and uncertainty in transmission can make communication uncertain and frustrating.

Textphones are, of course, a mainstay of deaf telecoms, but 92% people were frustrated that “companies and organizations often don't know how to use a textphone”.

RNID Typetalk is also very popular, but half of the respondents were concerned that companies often don't accept Typetalk calls.

More about the survey inside ...

TAG's newsletter for advisers of deaf people and others interested in deaf telecoms

Inside this issue:

- Deaf text telecoms survey results
- Tech past & present at NDCS
- Mainstreaming deaf telecoms
- TAG takes on broadcasting
- Blogging all over the world

Text telecom survey

Who's in, who's out. What's hot, what's not.

Fact File

The Text Telecoms Survey

Commissioned by TAG, BT, Orange, O2, Vodafone, Ofcom, and DIEL

Researched by Rehabilitation Resource Centre at The City University

Sample of 381 usable questionnaires

Data from 15-91 year-olds
40% who were profoundly deaf
20% who could hear sounds but not words
22% who preferred sign language communication

The UK's most comprehensive, independent text telecoms study of deaf people conducted by City University highlighted some important trends.

Ease of use and speed – preferably at low cost – are what deaf people look for in text telecoms.

However, if deaf people are familiar with a particular form of text communication and if it is widely used by their own contacts, they will tend to put up with the difficulties it entails.

Who's not texting?

Amongst deaf people, older people and women are the least likely to make use of the new and emerging alternatives to voice telecoms.

Many survey respondents thought that although there was plenty of information about products and services, there wasn't enough information about how to use them. The researchers thought this was especially relevant to older people who lose their hearing later in life and who are probably the largest group who would benefit from alternatives to voice telephony.

It was also clear that a lot of people are not using enlargement and colour facilities in computers to make communications easier to read.

Perceived high cost is also holding back the spread of text alternatives. This applies not only to older people but to deaf people as a whole because they are more likely to be on lower incomes than the general population.

Email

With 74% of respondents using email, it is hugely popular for many reasons – it's mainstream, fast, cheap and, reflecting the growing computer awareness of the general population, now even regarded as easy to use. Like the general population, deaf people are frustrated by spam and the odd technical problem.

The rise of SMS

SMS is one of the big technology success stories of deaf telecoms. Deaf people liked it because it's mainstream, it's easy and it can be used anywhere. And they also liked to use it at home.

Of course the short message length, delays, delivery uncertainties, costs and conversations that weren't live were seen as drawbacks, but even so half of the respondents used SMS at least daily.

The decline of fax

Despite being quick and easy to use, faxing has declined in popularity.

Fax is still widely used by deaf people at work, but at home it is going out of favour. Deaf people like the fact that it is mainstream, but it's obviously not mainstream enough as 75% of respondents said that not many of their contacts possess a fax machine.

More information on the report

You can see a copy of the Executive Summary of the report on the TAG website:

<http://telecomsactiongroup.org.uk>

Text telecoms at work

Deaf people used fax a lot more for work than for personal and social purposes, according to the Text Telecoms Survey. They also used email and textphones slightly more for work purposes. But Instant Messaging was used even less at work than at home.

The text telecoms survey showed that just over half of the sample who were in work had received equipment through the Government's Access To Work (ATW) scheme. Experiences with ATW were mixed. One-third said they had had problems with the scheme. Delays, lack of awareness and poor attitudes by ATW staff were the main problems.

Tech past & present at NDCS exhibition

NDCS marks its 60th birthday

As ever, the NDCS Exhibition at Esher on 17 and 18 June was a great success with professionals' day on Friday and family day on Saturday.

Amongst the 74 exhibition stands, one of the star attractions was a display of the different types of technology used by deaf people since the formation of the NDCS sixty years ago.



David Myers of TAG shows an example of the first textphone he used: the Vistel 1 dating from about 1981.



Chatterbox – a text messaging system using GPRS and Chatterbox software. There is a charge for the software, but the costs per message are much less than the usual cost of SMS. Launched earlier this year. See www.chatterboxsoftware.com

“Seeing the variety of equipment on display shows just how far technology has advanced in a relatively short time,” said Richard Vaughan of NDCS who organized the historical stand. “Older visitors recognised some of the equipment they had used in the past, and many children said how glad they were that the products available today are so much more attractive and easier to use.”

A view from the sidelines

Over the past five years, text-based communication has become mainstream. Services like SMS text messaging on mobile phones and Instant Messaging services on the Internet have attracted millions of hearing users – and these services both happen to be well-suited to many deaf people.

The convergence of these technologies will eventually make real-time, text- or even video-based chat a reality. There could be a huge user base using these services at home or through mobile devices like mobiles or PDAs.

Despite the potential of these technologies to build bridges between deaf telecoms and the growing global information infrastructure, the deaf world

sometimes seems surprisingly slow to embrace them.

Rather than improving the accessibility of these products or ensuring that they become more affordable for all deaf people, it seems that many of the technologies on display at the National Deaf Children's Society exhibition in June continued to be specialist media and devices designed exclusively for deaf users.

The Text Telecoms Survey reported that deaf people generally “preferred methods of text communication available to all and not specifically targeted at those with a disability”. For the first time, such technologies are widely available and should be embraced and improved upon.

Instant Messaging
a correction: last issue we said that all IM services interconnect. Some software, like Trillian, lets you chat across networks.

New Bluetooth mobile phone earpiece from GN Resound is the first to be hearing-aid compatible.

Ross Trotter, TAG Secretary, has been appointed to the Ofcom Advisory Committee on Older & Disabled People

TAG thanks Vodafone for its sponsorship of Sequel



TAG looks to broadcasting

but sees no subtitles at a BBC launch

The differences between telecoms and broadcasting are becoming blurred. Already Oftel, the telecoms regulator has been absorbed into a larger broadcasting and telecoms regulator: Ofcom. TAG is following suit.

Since 1986, TAG has provided a single voice on telecoms issues for deaf people, and since 1978 the Deaf Broadcasting Council (DBC) has provided a similar mouthpiece on broadcasting issues.

TAG greatly respects the valuable work of the DBC particularly in its campaigning for subtitling and TV programmes specifically for deaf people. Indeed, TAG has worked with DBC for some years on technical issues surrounding broadcasting and now feels the time is right to formally add broadcasting to its own remit.

Ruth Myers, the current Chair of TAG, and Secretary of DBC for 10 years, explained: "When the DBC was founded around 1978, there were just two broadcasters – BBC and ITV. And you could only receive TV broadcasts through an aerial. Now there are hundreds of broadcast channels and you can receive them through an aerial, cable or satellite, and via analogue or digital

signals. So there's likely to be plenty of work for both TAG and DBC to ensure that deaf people have access to broadcasting – and telecommunication – services."

The BBC's Charter is up for renewal in 2006 and TAG was represented at the launch of its vision for public service broadcasting in the future.

Ruth Myers, who was at the launch, said: "We looked through the BBC's *Building Public Value* document to see what the future holds for subtitling and sign language. But we couldn't find a single reference to either of them. It's one of the first things we will be addressing!

"Not only do we want the BBC to commit to subtitling 100% of its output by 2007, but we also want a commitment to maintaining and improving quality, and a long-overdue subtitling of regional news and breakfast programmes in all regions."

A film about the BBC's lesser-known work was shown at the launch – without subtitles. Ironically, this left TAG's delegate struggling to understand, and was a wasted opportunity to make the hearing delegates aware of the importance of subtitling.

Blogging

Blogs – or weblogs – are one of the fast-growing phenomena of the Internet. There don't seem to be many deaf bloggers out there yet, but that could change soon.

A blog is a diary – some are personal, some are professional, some are designed to be read by friends, but others are very public – and the topics they cover vary enormously. Some are interesting and vibrant. Some are dull, rude or are just plain crazy.

The most interesting deaf blog I've come across so far is by an American deaf woman about to have a cochlear implant: http://amysusan.com/public_html/blog.html

Amy's blog tells the story of her decision to have an implant and the up-coming operation – it's a really good read.

You can run a blog for free – and it's very easy if you have any computing and Internet knowledge. The biggest blogging site is: www.blogger.com. You could have your blog up-and-running in a few minutes. You can write as little or as much as you like and you can even include photos.

Remember your blog can be read by anyone – if they can find it. But you can be anonymous. You can set up a "profile" listing your interests so that other bloggers can contact you.

TAG website

telecomsactiongroup.org.uk


Events

TAG seminar on communications – telecoms and broadcasting

19 October 2004

10am to 5pm

The Institute for Child Health
30 Guildford Street
London WC1

 Tickets £30 from r.myers@merula.co.uk

Sequel distribution

If you would you like to receive *Sequel*, contact:

TAG – Sequel
70 Blacketts Wood Drive
Chorleywood
Rickmansworth
Herts WD3 5QQ
email Rmyers@waitrose.com

TAG contact

Ross Trotter

TAG Secretary

36 Victoria Street

Wetherby

Yorkshire LS22 6RE

Fax 01937 580956

Email

tagenquiries@hotmail.com