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AccessApps

AccessApps is a collection of portable open source and freeware software programs for the Windows operating system (Soffed Education, n.d.). The collection offers programs to support reading, writing, planning, and cognition. Originally started as a project at the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Regional Support Centre in Scotland, its intent was to provide low cost solutions to support learners, especially those with accessibility needs. AccessApps branched out into several collections aimed at specific user groups, including LearnApps for students, TeachApps for instructional staff, and MyStudyBar, also for students. The project as a whole was renamed EduApps. In the summer of 2011, JISC was disbanded, and the core team founded a company, Soffed. While maintenance and development of EduApps is on hold while the new company establishes firm financial footing, the principals remain committed to the project (K Lamb, personal communication, March 27, 2012).

AccessApps portable software programs run off of a USB drive by means of an application launcher, ASuite. Using portable software allows the user to control and customize the computing experience on virtually any Windows PC, anywhere. The application launcher provides an interface for the user, and allows the applications mounted on the USB drive to use the PC's operating system and processing resources without permanently storing settings or data on the PC. Settings and data are stored on the USB drive. AccessApps includes nearly fifty programs, including Internet browsers, email, word processing, presentation, photo editing, and video editing programs. Most notably, AccessApps includes programs for accessibility,

including the screen reader NVDA, file conversion programs, and programs to support planning and comprehension, to change screen resolution, to enhance targeting, and to allow for alternate keyboard or mouse input.

Accessible technologies are devices people use to be able to gain access to things of which they might not otherwise be able to avail themselves for a variety of reasons. With respect to information technology, adaptive technologies may be required for physical or cognitive reasons, such as low vision or blindness, deafness, motor coordination difficulties, dyslexia, attention disorders, written language disabilities, etc. To gain access to electronic information sources and communications, individuals may need to select and use specific technologies to be successful. AccessApps and other open source and freeware portable software applications allow institutions to provide and users to obtain accessibility solutions at very little financial cost, that of a USB drive plus any staff time needed to download and install the software. Access to a PC and an Internet connection to download, unpack, and install the software, as well as to use the software, are also needed. Individual users may then use the portable software on any PC with a USB port.

Individuals who are blind or visually impaired typically use screen readers to access content on computers. JAWS (Freedom Scientific, Inc., 2012) is the industry leader and costs between $900 and $1100 for a single license. There is also an additional cost for a maintenance agreement. WindowEyes (GW Micro, Inc., 2012) is priced comparably. Mac OSX operating system includes a built-in screen reader and other accessibility features, but Apple PCs typically cost significantly more than Windows PCs, and are less often available as public access computers. NVDA (NV Access Limited, 2012) is a free and open source screen reader for Windows, and while it has not yet been adopted by very many users who are blind or have low

vision, it is gaining in popularity (WebAIM, 2011). A major advantage to using NVDA as a portable application for a user who is blind or has low vision is that the user can master the use one screen reader, control which version of the screen reader is used, have a consistent user experience because settings and customized controls are retained in the program on the USB drive, and use the screen reader on any Windows PC.

Users with learning or other cognitive disabilities may benefit from Kurzweil 3000 (Cambium Learning, n.d.), a very effective set of integrated tools to support reading, comprehension, and composition. A single license costs $1395. There are programs in the AccessApps collection that can provide some of the same support features such as those for text to speech conversion, mind-mapping to aid in planning, and word prediction to aid in composition and typing. While the applications in AccessApps do not provide the comprehensive, seamless experience of Kurzweil 3000, what they do provide are useful and are available at virtually no cost.

Not only are open source and freeware portable applications useful for people who need adaptive technology, they are also valuable for empowering socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals. For less than ten dollars, one may purchase a USB drive of sufficient capacity to mount a powerful set of portable software programs and store several gigabytes of data. The software and data are owned and controlled by the person in possession of the USB drive, and can be accessed and used on any PC, including public access computers. There are application launchers and applications available for Windows, Mac OSX, and Linux operating systems.

A disadvantage of using portable open source and freeware software is that it may require a fair amount of computer literacy and sophisticated expertise on the part of the user or the institution supporting the user's computer use and software. Individuals may require training in

order to use the portable software applications. Individual users may need to manually update software, and the process may not be straightforward, but may require use of a command line interface. Public access computers may not allow software to be downloaded from the Internet. Free services in the cloud, such as Google Docs, have become available in recent years. A user may access documents and other data from any PC connected to the Internet. But using cloud services often require an Internet connection. In addition, using cloud services, whether free or for a fee, may pose privacy concerns. Often, a user account must be created, one's data may be accessible only online, and the entity providing the service may claim ownership of the data. Since the release of AccessApps, many improvements have been made to portable software. PortableApps.com (PortableApps.com, n.d.) allows for automatic updates, and LibreOffice, the descendent of OpenOffice, an office software suite comparable to MicroSoft Office, is now available there. In addition, there is a large online community of users, as well as local user groups, to provide advice and assistance.

AccessApps is a good introduction to portable applications, particularly for those concerned with accessibility for people with disabilities, people who are economically disadvantaged, and people with concerns about privacy. A public library or educational institution could introduce users, students and staff to portable applications to support learning and information access. Users or students could provide USB drives, or USB drives could be purchased by the library or educational institution. Staff, students, or volunteers could download and install the portable software. Training in the use of the software could be provided, or it could be left up to the individual user. The software programs collected in AccessApps offer opportunities for the empowerment of computer users, regardless of physical or cognitive ability, or socioeconomic status.

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