Ted Henter

I have been asked to discuss how we made JAWS successful, but you don't want to do it the way we did; we did it the very long and hard way, without a lot of forethought, without a lot of knowledge about how to do it, but we're very fortunate that we did it. Along the way I was able to learn a whole lot of things about how it should be done. I would like to present some of those ideas here today. JAWS for Windows came out in 1995 and soon became the most widely used Windows screen reader and still is today. Close to two hundred thousand people are using it around the world and in close to 20 different languages. So it's widely used and it has a dominant position in the market. Like I said, we didn't get there by good planning. We just started working on an English-based screen reader and worked very hard to make it as good as we could because I was the President of the company. I'm blind. The Chief Technology Officer was also blind. A lot of our programmers and tech support people and sales people were blind and would use it every day, so we have a lot of input. As this became a pretty good English-speaking screen reader, we branched out into Europe. Why did we go there? Well that's where the money was. People in Europe wanted a German-speaking screen reader, a Swedish-speaking screen reader, and they had the money. So they came to us, working with them in partnership with the people in the country that know the language and things like that. They know how to get the money. We started developing different language versions, and later on as the product became more successful and as the company became more profitable, we branched out into the lesser developed countries as well. There's a couple of different ways to do that. Then as we started getting more widespread, more global, let's say, we ran into a lot more problems as far as making the computer talk accessible to the various versions of Windows, as it is a Windows-based screen reader and various applications. We were fortunate enough to be able to talk to developers like IBM that have always been interested in accessibility. Microsoft was there too, and there were a lot of them, but some were not interested at all. Anyway, we were fortunate enough to get cooperation from the major manufacturers, learned some of the insides of their software, got some help from them to fix some issues and provide more access to JAWS in order to access the information that's embedded in it there.

The main thing we have to learn about that whole process is that you have to start with a good core of developers, products and product ideas and develop something that works pretty good in one environment. Then branch out through partnerships in other countries with other languages, basically. However, there are also things like Braille. We also helped put in Braille. There are various Braille languages, so you need expertise in those areas and it's very difficult to get that in one place from one person. So you need to involve a lot of different people around the world, and what we would do is sell the basic product to, let's say someone in France, and they would have an exclusive territory. They would invest in the translations and all the changes that need to be done. Now the guys that are designing the core product have to make all this possible. It has to be designed in such a way that these can be done in an efficient manner.

The core company or partnership would then go to the mainstream developers and make sure we have cooperation there. Nowadays it's easier to do than it was 20 years ago. The companies became a lot more friendly and cooperative along the way. I think those are some good things that we can learn at this conference. Those three pieces, the core products, the people around the world that will convert it to their particular needs, and then, at the other end, the people that will provide the information to the developers, when together, are all a great partnership. There's a lot more there that will make it a successful product. I mentioned the user input, and a lot of the people of the company were blind. We had a lot of user input and we listened to a lot of our customers. That's a very important part.

Personally, I don't think the solution is to have the access built in by the company that builds the operating system. That would be a terrible thing for disabled people around the world because a lot of incentives disappear then, and there are economic realities that make certain features go away when it's time to release the product. You want to have a viable industry like we have now or small developers like my company competing with each other, competing to provide the best access that there is, with some cooperating and others competing. That's an important thing for us to take away from this conference.