

ZoomText Chosen as Part of Solution to Make Voting in Oregon More Accessible

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002 stipulates that by 2006, every polling place have at least one voting system that allows voters with disabilities equal access and opportunity to vote privately and independently. Since Oregon is an all vote-by-mail state, all eligible voters receive a printed ballot at home. While vote-by-mail created new accessibility for voters who were previously unable to travel to or access a polling place, it created new barriers for voters who are unable to access printed materials. Overcoming this barrier required some new thinking and approaches to voting accessibility in a vote-by-mail environment.

Gene Newton, Program Officer for HAVA and his wife Angel Hale, a local business owner who is blind, discussed possible solutions for accessible voting for people unable to access the printed ballot in 2004. Those discussions led to the development of an early concept called the "HTML Ballot". The HTML Ballot proof of concept project was completed in 2005 in a small Oregon county where three voters successfully voted using the HTML Ballot. Eventually, through the hard work of the HAVA Disability Subcommittee members and the support and commitment of the Secretary of State to provide accessible voting, the HTML Ballot became the Alternate Format Ballot (AFB). The AFB was enthusiastically supported by the disability community as the preferred Oregon solution for meeting the HAVA requirements for privacy and independence.

The Secretary of State, through a competitive bid process, contracted with OakTree Digital of Portland, Oregon. OakTree developed and implemented a conversion application that converts the election data (exported as an XML file by each county) from the Oregon Central Voter Registration System's Election Module into W3C level 2 compliant HTML coded ballots. The resulting ballots are the AFB's used for the election. The AFB can be opened using any web browser, finally allowing users with assistive technology needs to access, mark and print a ballot privately and independently at home.

The AFB was designed using Universal Design methodology in order to support as many types of assistive technology as possible. Voters can request and receive the AFB at home via email, CD or on data disc. Voters who do not have the necessary technology can access the AFB at the 36 county elections offices. Each county has a minimum of two Accessible Computer Stations (ACS) fully equipped with assistive hardware and software to allow access for those with a wide range of disabilities. Some counties have voter assistance teams that are available to provide, upon request, voting assistance using the ACS and AFB, at care facilities, hospitals, assisted living centers, private homes or just about anywhere the voter requests assistance. The AFB and ACS were implemented for the May 2008 Primary Election, and were used in the November 2008 General Election. Oregon plans to continue using and improving the AFB and ACS for all future elections.

ZoomText Beats Out the Competition

The original solution for the ACS proposed by EnableMart, the winning vendor of the ACS Request for Proposal, was to combine the powers of ZoomText Magnifier with a screenreader. However, after the vendor demonstration, Gene asked EnableMart to explore the possibility of a single solution using ZoomText Magnifier/Reader. He said “the quality of the NeoSpeech synthesizers in ZoomText Magnifier/Reader, the overall capabilities of ZoomText, and the simplicity and elegance of having a single piece of software to provide multiple assistive tools including voicing, positioned ZoomText Magnifier/Reader as a potential perfect single solution”.

EnableMart eventually proposed and the state accepted the ZoomText Magnifier/Reader Scripting solution offered by Ai Squared. Working with the state, Ai Squared was able to utilize the full potential of ZoomText Scripting to create a custom solution for accessing the AFB on the ACS. In the end, ZoomText Magnifier/Reader Scripting solution for the ACS proved to be both a superior and more cost effective solution. The ACS and AFB have helped Oregon meet the HAVA requirements for privacy and independence for voters with disabilities.

Working with Ai Squared

While the real power of the AFB is that it can be completed by the voter at home using whatever technology they require to access a computer, the state wanted to ensure that voters with disabilities who did not have the necessary technology could also access the AFB. Thus, the ACS was a necessary complement to, and requirement for, the AFB process. EnableMart equipped each ACS with the following: a desktop or laptop PC with Windows XP and Internet Explorer 7, ZoomText with Scripting, Intellikeys touch-pad keyboard, BIGtrack mouse and a joystick to help those without fine motor skills, a standard keyboard with a keyguard for voters unable to use the Intellikeys or those preferring a standard keyboard, a switch interface with switch devices, and a printer/scanner combination to print the ballot and to provide a means for the voter who is blind to verify the printed ballot. The hardware and software was selected to accommodate individuals across a wide range of disabilities to help ensure access by the optimum number of voters including voters who are blind, have low vision, have cognitive disorders, or who have other disabilities that prevent them from being able to access or mark a printed ballot.

Scripting Solution

With ZoomText’s Scripting capabilities, customized hotkeys were created to allow the voter to navigate between races, candidates, and ballot measures. Using a custom Intellikeys layout designed by the HAVA Disability Subcommittee members, voters have a user-friendly interface that allows them to easily mark, verify and print the ballot. The voter can also have instructions read aloud to them, describing the function of each key on the interface. Privacy is ensured through the use of headphones when necessary. ZoomText reads the race title, the number of candidates in each race, each candidate’s name and whether or not the candidate has been selected. Voters can verify each race to make sure the vote is accurate. When verifying each race, voters are alerted through pop-up message boxes if they have undervoted or overvoted any given contest. Voters are also able to enter write-in votes using the interface. All information is presented audibly to make the experience as easy and pleasant as possible. Other features of ZoomText such as text focus, screen magnification, and text being highlighted as it is voiced, have helped provide additional support for voters using the ACS.

Benefits

Feedback from the voters has been very positive. Winslow Parker, the Adaptive Technology Specialist at the Oregon Commission for the Blind, shared his voting feedback: "I voted completely independently; it feels so very good. If you don't own a computer with a screen reader, every election office has two computers to help you carry out the task: one on-site and one portable unit. Thanks for all your hard work in giving us a truly accessible and tamper-proof system in Oregon! [I feel that] we have the very best system available anywhere in the United States."

ZoomText At A Glance:

ZoomText 9.1 is a powerful computer access solution for the visually impaired. Consisting of two adaptive technologies—screen magnification and screen reading— ZoomText allows you to see and hear everything on the computer screen, providing complete access to applications, documents, email and the Internet. Specialized support is provided for Microsoft Office (Word, Excel and Outlook), Internet Explorer, Firefox and Adobe Acrobat Reader.

ZoomText is available in two versions: ZoomText Magnifier and ZoomText Magnifier/Reader. Both versions include Ai Squared's exclusive "xFont" technology, delivering perfectly clear text at all magnification levels (up to 36x). A variety of screen enhancement features make everything on the screen easy to see and follow. ZoomText Magnifier/Reader features powerful screen and document reading with human-sounding "NeoSpeech" voices that are pleasant to listen to all day long.

ZoomText works on laptops and desktop computers running Windows Vista, XP or 2000.

Contact Information:

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