

Joe Mills, Software Engineer

By Melanie G. Snyder

It's 8:30 a.m. and Joe Mills is in his office, reviewing the list of software problems he'll have to resolve today. He speaks into the microphone on the headset he wears, dictating a reply to an e-mail. The Dragon "NaturallySpeaking" voice recognition software on his computer translates what he is saying into a typed e-mail, which Joe can then send with a click of the mouse that rests near his left hand.

"I had to do a little bit of work to get the software set up initially to recognize my voice," Joe explains. "Then, the accuracy improves over time as I'm using it. When the software makes a mistake translating a word that I say, I correct it and then it recognizes how my voice sounds when I say that particular word."

Joe then makes his first phone call of the morning. Instead of using a telephone, he makes all of his phone calls through the Internet, using technology called "voice over IP" or VoIP.

"Basically I'm talking to you right now through the Internet," Joe says. "Your voice goes through the phone lines to my VoIP provider. They change your voice waves — which are an analog signal — to a digital signal that computers can read and send them to me over the Internet."

Joe uses these forms of assistive technology to carry out his full-time job as a software engineer for an international publishing company. His office is in a corner of his bedroom at home. His employer agreed to let him work from home and supplied the necessary computer equipment and connections to the company computers, 50 miles away.

"I have spinal muscular atrophy, a progressive disease that deteriorates the muscles," Joe explains. "I'm quadriplegic, except that I have just enough use of my arms to use the mouse at the computer. Healthwise, it would be nearly impossible for me to travel to an office to work every day."

Joe earned a bachelor's degree in Management Information Systems from Wright State University in Ohio five years ago and then started looking for a job. Joe did a lot of networking (*see related article: Finding a Job*) and his sister was a big help in landing his current job.



Photo courtesy of Joe Mills.

"I sent my resume to hundreds of companies and got some calls for interviews," he says, "but at the point where I told them I was physically disabled and was looking for a home-based position — that was typically where the conversation ended. But that was five years ago. If I was to leave my job now, I would probably have more home-based opportunities — but at that time, it was really a matter of finding a company and an individual manager in that company who embraced and understood the benefits of home-based employees and was willing to give me a chance to show what I could do."

According to his co-workers, Joe's own positive outlook and "can-do" attitude have also been a major factor in his success on the job.

"Pretty much everything is a challenge for me, but I just find ways around the barriers," Joe says matter-of-factly.

His advice to fellow job-hunters? "Be as honest as you can with the person interviewing you about your abilities, potential barriers and how they could be overcome. If you aren't getting a good feeling that the person you're interviewing with would be willing to work with you, you probably don't want to work there anyway."

He continues, "Of course, you're not going to know everything until you're actually there on the job and see how things are set up — but if you're talking with an employer who is willing to work with you, they'll work with you to understand and accept you as you are." ■