Word perfect

How a dyslexic student built a business out of his struggle with spelling

Neil Cottrell is a young entrepreneur who turned his difficulty with reading, writing and remembering things into a business that now helps tens of thousands of people with similar disabilities.

In many ways he is lucky; he was identified as having dyslexia when he was 11. His local education authority bought him a laptop and assistive software that included text to speech, mind mapping and calendar programs.

"Reading, spelling, writing and memory were all causing me a lot of issues. I grew up relying on coping strategies," he says. "I was always on the look out for technology that could help me."

By the age of 15 he was having real problems getting ideas down on paper. Despite his enthusiasm for assistive technology he struggled to find the right software to help.

Although many products set out to do the same thing they worked in very different ways.

Cottrell's big problem was spelling. He had a spellchecker, but instead of correcting spellings as he went along it waited until he had finished, leaving him with the job of ploughing through hundreds of spelling errors underlined in red.

"It was very disruptive and I was really having problems composing written work; that was when I began working on the software that became Global AutoCorrect."

The trouble with many spell checkers is that you have to manually confirm each correction, which can take a long time. Cottrell developed a program that would recognise the word that someone wanted to use and automatically correct its spelling.

"You don't see it working. When you type a spelling mistake, instead of waiting it will make that change for you straight away, if it is sure of what you want to say.

"It is very different to a spellchecker and works alongside the toolbox of software you already have."

The £109 program uses phonetics to work out what word a user is trying to spell. It can be used for emails, for essays and reports, and on the web. The software also keeps track of spelling mistakes so the user can work on them in their own time.

It was after completing a psychology degree at Cardiff University in 2007 that Cottrell decided to build a business out of his spelling correction program. He got together £6,000 to start his company, LexAble.

"I am an entrepreneurial person. My main drive was that Global AutoCorrect had really helped me in my studies and I wanted other people to share it."

Although Cottrell wrote the software initially, he now has a team of five people working with him in Wales developing the product.

"We spend an awful lot of time ensuring that customers have millions of auto corrections available to them. Global AutoCorrect works particularly well with longer words."

In the early days, he explains, he and his colleagues had to work hard to tell people about the software. "Then it got to the point that when I picked up the phone people knew about Global AutoCorrect before I started talking about it."

Neil Cottrell, inventor of Global AutoCorrect spell checker

It has become even easier to get the word out after LexAble won a Technology4Good award from the charity AbilityNet earlier this year. It has persuaded larger companies to add its software to their toolkit of assistive technology.

What of the future? An Apple version of the PC software is on the stocks and overseas markets beckon as well with the company on the lookout for opportunities outside the UK.

"We want to cement our position as top dog in auto correction and we also want to expand the business into new markets," says Cottrell. ■
www.lexable.com