

BRINGING THE MESSAGE OF HEARING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES TO ALL HARD OF HEARING PEOPLE IN ISRAEL

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In this day and age of more and more sophisticated technology in all aspects of daily life, two of the most important tasks of organizations of hard of hearing people are to increase the understanding and use of Hearing Assistive Technologies (HATs) and to press for accessibility for the hard of hearing population in all aspects of daily life. Even though these two issues are two sides of the same coin, this paper will relate primarily to the first subject – HATs.

We are about to describe how in Israel, a small country of about six and a half million people, Bekol, the national organization of hard of hearing people, working with a coalition of other organizations, which I will describe shortly, established the country's first Center for Hearing Assistive Technologies and Accessibility. Together with this, we are embarking on an ambitious program to inform as many as possible of our 650,000 hard of hearing people about HATs and to make the world of sound accessible to all of us wherever we are – at home, in education, at work, in offices, in all recreational and cultural settings, medical frameworks, and so forth.

Professor Mark Ross, probably the leading rehabilitation audiologist in the United States and possibly in the world, likes to remind us: "Hearing aids are not enough!" What he is saying is that in many, and perhaps, most listening situations, our hearing aids alone cannot help us to hear and understand everything that we are supposed to and can. With only our hearing aids, background noise, distance from the source of sound and the acoustics around us may make it difficult or perhaps impossible to hear and understand. This is where the ever-growing range of HATs or Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs) comes into the picture. Some HATs function together with our hearing aids and some HATs work alone. It is clear to everyone here that I am talking about such equipment as telephone amplifiers; sophisticated FM systems that help us to participate in conversations around a living-room table; an Infra-red system in the theater; and an alarm clock connected to a vibrator under our bed-pillow.

As all of us here know, these are just a few examples of the ever-growing list of hearing assistive technologies that can improve the quality of life for all of us. The unfortunate part, in Israel at least, and we would guess in many other

countries around the world, most hard of hearing people do not know about this technology. We have known this for a long time but it took a while before we were able to set up our Accessibility and HATs Center.

The Bekol Center for Accessibility and Hearing Assistive Technologies was opened about two months ago in the city of Tel Aviv – Yafo which is in the center of Israel. As indicated earlier, a rather unique coalition of forces came together in order to set up the Center that we are now talking about. Our first partner was the Rotary Club of Tel Aviv – Yafo, which helped us to obtain a generous grant from the Dr. Wolf Zegla Fund. (By the way, we have noticed in various publications that other Rotary Clubs around the world have also supported projects involving hearing-impaired people.) Actually this generous Rotary grant started the ball rolling for us.

The other three partners are important professional, service-oriented organizations in Israel that have actually been working together for several years, promoting accessibility and hearing assistive technologies for hard of hearing people. The three organizations are Shekel - Community Services for People with Disabilities; JDC-Eshel – The Association for the Planning and Development of Services for the Aged in Israel; and Matav – A Non Profit Association for Homehelp and Welfare Services.

Two departments of our National Insurance Institute of Israel also provided generous financial support: The Fund for the Development of Services for Disabled People and The Fund for Special Projects.

Our coalition is already planning a second HATs and Accessibility Center in the northern part of Israel. We hope that within a few years, there will be a network of four centers, serving every part of the country.

Time does not allow us to go into the history of the use of hearing assistive technologies in Israel. But some of the highlights may be interesting. There does not seem to have been any significant number of HATs in Israel until relatively recently. But about three decades ago, Aharon Eine, a deaf person began to produce for deaf parents an instrument that he called “The Baby-Sitter.” This consisted of a microphone above the crib of a baby, connected to two strong bulbs above the head of the deaf parents, which flashed of course when the baby cried. This simple but effective device has become very popular among deaf people.

Fast forward to 1992, when Israel hosted the 4th International Congress of IFHOH, in Jerusalem. At that time, real time captioning was not the relatively simple process it is today. As a matter of fact, we were not sure that we could have captioning at that Congress. However, Omer Zak, a brilliant, deaf electronic engineer, built what was then probably a pioneering network of computers that was able to produce captioning in three languages for the Congress. Omer has also developed some other technological products related to computerized captioning, some of them with Avi Blau, a member of the Bekol executive.

About ten years ago, (before Bekol was established) the first author of this paper (a retired audiologist and educator of hearing impaired children) brought to Israel the Ameriphone Alertmaster. I must admit that I was not quite sure how to proceed with it. Then, a good friend of mine, for about 50 years at the time, Gabe Bloom, a normally hearing retired business executive, volunteered to work with me on promoting accessibility for people with hearing impairment through the introduction of HATs in Israel. Gabe convinced a large sound and light company in Israel to set up a new business to import, market and promote hearing assistive technologies. He also played an important role in convincing and helping Shekel, mentioned earlier, to set up a program to promote HATs for hard of hearing people.

We have gone into all these details of how our HATs Center was developed as it may provide a model for organizations in other countries that would like to set up similar programs.

PROGRAM OF THE HATS AND ACCESSIBILITY CENTER

The four major functions of our new center are:

1. Continuing to Make Israel More Accessible for Hard of Hearing People
2. Hearing Assistive Technologies Demonstration Rooms
3. Outreach Activities
4. Internet Information Center

1. CONTINUING TO MAKE ISRAEL MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR US

Bekol has played a leading role on this issue for a number of years. The majority of the major theaters in Israel now have Infra-Red equipment. At the present time, there are captions on about 20% of the programs on TV stations. But there is now legislation in preparation, initiated by Bekol, which will increase it in the near future. The prestigious Technion University in Haifa is accessible for hard of hearing people. We now want to help make movie houses, medical settings, banks, governmental offices, and many more retirement homes accessible as soon as possible.

2. HEARING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES DEMONSTRATION ROOMS.

These rooms are the very busy heart of our new Center. It is actually one big room, which can easily be divided with sliding doors into two rooms. (Our architect did a remarkable job here.)

When it is two separate rooms, one room is a demonstration room of personal hearing assistive technologies, such as amplified telephones, amplifiers for TV sets, and various systems to supplement the doorbell that many hard of hearing people have difficulty hearing. This room probably contains and demonstrates nearly all the personal HATs that are available in Israel, most of them imported, but a few locally produced.

The other half of the divided room is a small lecture room. Here we demonstrate what is called large audience assistive technology. This room has an Infra-Red system, with microphones, I-R transmitters and I-R receivers; an FM system; and sound field loud speakers. Both these rooms have acoustically-treated walls and ceilings, and rugs on the floor, in order to demonstrate the advantages of acoustic treatment for both normally hearing and hard of hearing listeners.

We have a steady stream of visitors who are guided through these rooms. Through our outreach program (which we will discuss shortly) we are encouraging individuals and groups from all over the center of the country to visit these Demonstration Rooms. The major aim of these two demonstration rooms is of course to help overcome the lack of awareness of HATs in Israel that we referred to earlier in this paper.

Our visitors are guided through these two rooms by staff members or trained hard of hearing guides. (More about this in the coming discussion of our Outreach Program).

When the sliding doors between the two rooms are pushed aside (very easily done) we have a larger lecture hall, which can seat 35 – 40 people. Here again we can very effectively demonstrate the good acoustics and the large audience assistive technology.

Generally speaking, when hearing impaired persons visit the Demonstration Rooms, they will first be interviewed by a staff member or a trained volunteer, in order to get a general picture of the visitors and their needs. While in the demonstration rooms, visitors are encouraged to try all the assistive technologies that can help them.

Towards the end of the visit, visitors will be referred to the appropriate dealer(s) in Israel, with a printed form and other recorded information and comments that assist both the client and the dealer.

It is important to note that there will be other categories of visitors, in addition to hearing impaired people, to our Demonstration Rooms:

- a. Deaf and hard of hearing children and youth and their parents and teachers
- b. Family members, most likely the adult children, of elderly hard of hearing people. Let's remember that most hard of hearing people become HOH after age 60 or 65. Many in this age group or older may not be capable of making the appropriate decisions for selecting Hats and paying for them.
- c. Professionals of all kinds: audiologists, psychologists, social workers, otolaryngologists and other doctors with a range of relevant specializations, nurses, geriatric personnel, etc.
- d. Management and administrators of various kinds: directors of retirement homes, decision makers in various kinds of support funds, and administrators in local and national authorities.

It is important to note that when all these people come to visit us, they will learn not only about HATs and accessibility, but also about the needs of hard of hearing people, which we can all agree, would be very helpful.

3. OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Bekol and our partners – Shekel, Eshel, and Matav – have devoted much thought and energy to getting our messages about accessibility and hearing assistive technologies to the public out there and especially to hard of hearing people. We have used lectures, pamphlets, and what we call “public relations”. And yet we are very surprised at how few hard of hearing people know about HATs.

The small professional staff of the Bekol Center – director, a social worker, half-time audiologist – cannot possibly do all their work in the Center and go out to lecture as frequently as they would like to.

So we recently decided to set up a training course of carefully selected (hard of hearing) members of Bekol to speak in various institutions such as day-care centers for elderly people and in retirement homes around the country. (Clearly of course, many of these listeners are hard of hearing). We carefully selected 20 from a larger number of applicants. They range in age from 30 to 50 and have agreed to speak at least twice a month.

Our intensive course included 50 hours of lectures. Dr. Orna Eran, head of the Speech and Hearing Department of Hadassah Academic College in Jerusalem lectured 25 hours on hearing, hearing loss, the audiogram, hearing aids and HATs. The other 25 hours were devoted to speaking skills, coping with groups and questions, and leading a discussion.

This corps of hard of hearing speakers has already begun to lecture. The results and responses are generally encouraging. Now our staff can concentrate on speaking to professional groups. Perhaps our hard of hearing speakers will be able to handle some of the others groups listed above among the potential visitors to our Center.

We are considering two other steps to improve on our outreaching.

We are seeking funds for two publications:

- a. A bi-monthly magazine for our membership, something similar to ‘Hearing Loss’, the publication of SHHH in the United States. It will be an informative publication, which can also be sent to many of the groups listed above as potential visitors to our Center.
- b. Reproduction of selected articles in professional magazines around the world: for example, distributing selected articles by Professor Ross and others to Israel’s hundreds of audiologists.

4. COMPUTERIZED INFORMATION CENTER

The Bekol Accessibility Center will probably have the most comprehensive Information Center on hearing impairment issues in Israel. The Information Center will serve the needs of hard of hearing and deaf people, their families, professionals, researchers, students, policy makers, journalists and others. It will contain information on all HATs available in Israel and around the world, updated lists of accessible places, tips on how to communicate with hearing impaired people, a wide range of articles on all issues and subjects, information on organizations, activities and more.

We thank IFHOH for giving us an opportunity to speak at this important forum on how we in Israel are educating our hard of hearing people in Israel that “hearing aids are not enough”.

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Thank you.

Now for your questions and feedback.