**Note from the editor**

A big CHEERIO to all SWDN members and welcome to our second edition of the SWDN newsletter. It is full of relevant information and lots of updates on SWDN happenings.

Our last issue created quite a stir and lots of people commented on this! On the whole though, members reacted positively and this issue contains several articles written by members who were inspired to contribute!

I want to invite all of you to send in anything that you feel might be good for our members to know or helpful for them, professionally or personally. The more input we get from you, the better our newsletter will be!

ENJOY!!

Editor
Rebecca Loftus
NEWSFLASH !!!!

Change has come to the secretary’s chair since our last issue! At that time, George Peterson was at the helm and steering the SWDN to new and unchartered waters. Since then, George has moved on to a new job in the private sector and we have had to elect a new secretary.

His able replacement is Rebecca Loftus and we welcome her to the new position. As she is new, we hope that the SWDN will be understanding and allow time to get to know the job and its responsibilities. Let us take the opportunity to welcome Rebecca to the position and give her all the support and encouragement she needs to fill George’s extensive role! Let us also take the opportunity to wish George all the best for his future and hope that he drops in to see us once in a while!

Report from the management committee

In the last Management meeting, the committee reviewed the SWDN’s goals and decided that a new framework may achieve these goals in a more efficient manner. The proposal that was put forward and accepted was that we have a smaller support committee (of probably 3 members) and focus the SWDN growth, support and even activities on the Satellite groups.

What this means is that we are expanding and placing more emphasis on the satellite groups. Ultimately we want to see satellites in each TAFE/DET region, and within some regions we will have a satellite group at each college. This will give our members greater contact with each other and hopefully promote solidarity and strength within the network.

The committee has also commenced preparations for the 2004 conference. Many of the details have not been finalised, however, the date is in October and we will send out more details as they come to hand.
The Satellite groups at Hunter and Richmond have been a great success. They have afforded members an opportunity to catch up between conferences and to get to know one another a little better.

The satellite activities that have taken place have been informal gatherings, where members met up and had lunch, and the more formal workshops on the Mentoring Program.

The attendance at the informal meetings was quite good and many members indicated that they would like to have more such meetings in their local area. A lot of networking was done and people expressed interest in having satellite groups at individual colleges (like Mt Druitt and Newcastle).

The more formal Mentoring meetings were also a great success and had a good turnout. These formal meetings went for the whole day and much progress was made.

The Hunter held an informal get together on April 28th. This was a great chance for local SWDN members to catch up and a great opportunity for potential members to attend and find out more about the Network. There were about 15 people including Teacher/Consultants, managers, support staff and teachers.

We were also lucky to have in attendance the SWDN State Secretary George Peterson, who not only had travelled from Bathurst but also gave a very informed insight into the history and future of the Network. This turned out to be a very positive and informative get together for all in attendance and everyone has shown interest in keeping these informal meetings going at the Hunter.
Two full day workshops have been held to start the program for this year. The meetings enabled some of the participants from regional areas to have a face to face meeting with their partners in mentoring. This chance to meet up, bounce ideas and develop a mentoring strategy is an important element of the workshops and feedback indicated it was greatly appreciated.

A big step for this year’s program is the inclusion of staff outside SWDN to act as mentors or mentees to our members in the program. In the pilot phase, only SWDN members had access to the program. This year we are really demonstrating inclusion!

Isn’t it great to see other staff choose to be mentored by persons from the SWDN! This step has increased our profile as well as demonstrating the skill level of SWDN members. Hopefully this sort of matching can continue to demonstrate what we CAN do and remove the myths about what we CAN’T do!

New structure of the Department: Ten regional offices have been established which are headed by Regional Directors. All regional directors offices are located within TAFE institutes of that region. Support to schools will be provided through the regional offices and through the 43 school education areas. The school education area office has the similar structure as former (40) district offices.

There are currently 10 TAFE institutes instead of 12. Southern Sydney institute has been incorporated into Sydney Institute and South Western Sydney Institute. OTEN will report to Western Sydney Institute.
TAFE HR unit is now called Regional HR unit that are responsible for recruitment of a range of staff under the Public Sector Employment and Management Act 2002 and the TAFE Commission Act 1990.

The NSW corporate services reform agenda continues to be implemented to facilitate streamlining of services, improving staff access to in Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and to centralise some HR functions such as workforce data collection for strategic planning.

An update on the Department’s staff placement information is available on the [http://detwww.det.nsw.edu.au/](http://detwww.det.nsw.edu.au/)

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**Meet our members**

*In this issue we have an article on the life and times of Kylie McCormack, SWDN committee member and global ambassador for people with a disability! Here is what she has to say about herself, her work and the SWDN (Ed.)*

**Early days**

I am a Farmers daughter from Marrar (near Wagga) farming Wheat Beef and Wool. We owned two thousand acres, so my old man taught me to drive when I was eight (heavy machinery as well) and I got my first motorbike when I was eleven. I have owned a horse since I was three too.

I went to Boarding School in Sydney for six years (9 - 15 yrs) and I used to fly home every third weekend and for school holidays. I went to TAFE after Boarding School and completed a Traineeship with the Department of Defence in Sydney. I commuted from Wollongong to Sydney everyday.
In the early eighties I was a professional competitive swimmer. Seven gold and one silver medals for Australia at the Vision Impaired Games in New Zealand. I was also in a North Sydney Pistol Shooters Club (range shooting) from 1981 to 1983, although this was just for fun (a hit and a giggle). Plus shooting on the Farm of course!

I have been travelling the world since I was 11yrs. I have been to England, Scotland, Singapore, New Zealand, and America, Mexico, around Australia, South Pacific and Europe. My favourites have been Europe and of course Australia, although I don’t backtrack and won’t go to the same place twice. There is too much to see in the world for that!!! I would really love to see Africa sometime.

**Employment**

I had 13 years with the Defence department, 2 years with the National Crime Authority and some time with the Wollongong City Council. As you can see I have been in the Public Service for quite a while and I now work in the Wollongong District Office, now the Wollongong School Education Area and I have been there for about 3 years. I work in the front office, typing documents, answering the switchboard and attending to over the counter enquiries, doing accounts payable, PA work, purchasing, and ordering stores and various other office administration duties.

**SWDN**

I thoroughly believe in the SWDN, this Department is the very first Department that I have come across that is running these initiatives. I feel that the Network is a wonderful group to belong to, and I feel the Network is getting stronger. The things that we need to do more of are educating other groups about our needs, and our abilities as a whole and as individuals to participate in the community.

I want to develop and grow in my role in the Committee and the Network particularly in my ability to pass on information to members on where to get help.

I think the Network also needs to keep abreast on Policy, OH&S procedures like a consumer watchdog. I need the WorkAble Program and the SWDN to keep on trucking - look what happened to me being displaced then directly appointed! Thanks to the Network I have a bright future and I want the Network to help others in the same way they helped me.
**2003 SWDN Conference**

The conference was really good; I especially enjoyed the talks on managing the change process and the talk on disclosure. It was wonderful to socialise with people with disabilities for support. The conference also inspired me to join the committee, especially the issues regarding Community of Practice. I would tell anyone to go to a SWDN Conference if they get a chance.

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**Member’s article**

*The following poignant and thoughtful insight into living with a mental illness was submitted by one of our members (ED)*

In a society that values conformity, having a work colleague that suffers from a mental illness can be very confronting and threatening for some people.

“Don’t make eye contact he’s crazy”

I have always been up front about my illness; I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). OCD is an illness of unwanted thoughts, doubting and repetitive thoughts or actions. I chose to tell my workmates about this to help bring about a wider understanding about mental health.

However, sometimes disclosure of an illness like mine can quickly bring out fear and ignorance in people. One thing I have experienced is that many people don’t make eye contact with me. I have even overheard someone say, “Don’t make eye contact he’s crazy”. Because of this I often feel like someone on the outside of life looking in.

“Oh no, I’ve got a nut obsessed with me!”

OCD can also have a negative effect on friendships and relationships with some people. Having been open with people about my illness, if I express to some people that I like them they seem to think “Oh no, I’ve got a nut obsessed with me!”
I get this feeling from the way they back off after my compliments. People often invalidate my feelings by putting them down as part of my OCD.

“The future is getting better!”

OK, after all this negative stuff let me tell you what I tell a lot of people: the future is getting better! Understanding of different mental illnesses is growing all the time and this is gradually filtering down to the general public. Medications have improved greatly over the last 15 years. The medication I take works wonders for me. My friends, and understanding workmates, understand I still have my bad days. But then again don’t we all?

One thing I will leave you with; one in five people will suffer from a mental illness at some time in their lives. There are a lot of us out there and we contribute to society in many positive ways.

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**Women's disability group takes off!**

In the two months since it formed, the NSW Network of Women with a Disability has rapidly grown and expanded its activities.

The Network is finalising an e-mail discussion group and plans to establish a regular newsletter.

They are looking for a woman with a disability to produce it. Call the Physical Disability Council of NSW on 02 9552 1606 if you are interested in taking on this role.

The Network has also established Belligerent Barbies, a street performance and action group to promote issues facing women with a disability.

For details of the Network’s upcoming meetings, contact the Physical Disability Council on 02 9552 1606 or freecall 1800 688 831.

(Article taken from Paraquad Website [www.paraquad-nsw.asn.au](http://www.paraquad-nsw.asn.au))
Ok folks here we are again, it’s time for Steve’s Techno tit-bits.

Hmmm, doesn’t time fly when you throw a clock?

Only joking, now lets get on to the serious stuff! I received some feedback from the last article and it was suggested by some that it was a bit too technical.

So ok, all feedback has been taken on board and with these suggestions taken into account, I’ll try and keep it simple; I just hope that it doesn’t get to such a simple stage that it becomes “boring”.

Anyway I’m sure you’ll let me know as any feedback both positive and negative helps to improve my article, so thank you to everyone who gave me suggestions, it all helps considerably.

Anyway enough of all that. The particular product that I would like to talk about this time is fairly unique in the respect that it can be used by people both with and without disabilities.

Ok, some people might know it as a Parrot, Parrot + or as it is now known the Voicemate.

It started its existence about five years ago as a digital organizer with voice recognition with a few voice prompts thrown in as a novelty. Like a lot of assistive technology it was manufactured in Europe, actually to be more precise France.

Then along came an English company called “Cobalt systems” which was a company in England that distributed assistive technology products for the vision impaired/ blind through the Royal National Institute for the Blind. This company was known for taking on products which might have potential for people with disabilities.
Well fortunately this company decided that the “Parrot” had loads of potential not only in its original market but also to people with disabilities.

Well what advancements have been made with this product since its outset five years ago? I hear you say.

Firstly let’s refer to it by its original name and as it advances we’ll go with the name changes.

The original Parrot fitted comfortably in the palm of your hand with a small button on the top left corner for changing through the different modes.

As you scroll through these functions they are announced i.e. Memo, calculator, appointment calendar, phone book and control panel which is where there were some problems in the first version.

For instance when you selected the control panel and started scrolling through various options some were not spoken but only displayed on the screen.

Now just imagine if you as a vision impaired or blind user did get lost in the control panel the only thing that you could do was to find someone who could read the screen to let you know what was happening. So independence went out the door and if you’re like me that is an important thing when you are using assistive technology.

After a few organizations here in Australia as in the Royal Society for the Blind in South Australia and the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind in Melbourne started taking on this product and feeding back to the manufacturers in France, advancements were being made.

Well after much research and testing the next generation of parrot was born, enter the “Parrot + “Hmmm, I know not much thought went in to the name maybe they should have had a naming competition or something?

Now you’ll be interested to know that even though the name didn’t change significantly the function of the Parrot+ certainly did!

Remember I said that some vital functions in the control panel were not spoken? Well they certainly were now! Which meant for the first time this digital organizer was accessible to people with and without disabilities. What a great step for technology and inclusion.
But before we all get to excited, remember that this was fairly new technology and like most technology it relies on a power source to run, in this case 4 AAA batteries. As you know these particular batteries are fairly expensive. This would not have been such a problem except that the circuitry that this technology was using was very dependant on high voltage in other words very, very thirsty on batteries actually a new set of batteries usually only lasted about 2 weeks at minimal use. Because of the battery issue and the fact that no spoken warning was given when the batteries went flat, this presented an even more serious problem.

The design of the Parrot + is such that the type of memory design it uses is what’s called volatile memory this means that it has to constantly have power to the unit to preserve what data is recorded into the memory.

Well, yes you guessed it, because of its heavy and fast drain on batteries and the fact that it doesn’t give any warning when the batteries go flat you loose all data which could be all memo’s and any entries you have in the phone book as well as any appointments etc. In other words a catastrophic disaster!

The only way around this problem was to replace the batteries before the two weeks were up and to only remove both batteries from one battery compartment being sure to leave the other pair of original batteries in place.

After replacing the first two batteries follow the same procedure with the other two. This allowed you to retain all the saved data. Now ok, I know that this might have seemed a non conventional way of doing things but hey the say “Prevention is often better than the cure”

But wait, was there a cure? Enter the final member in this ever improving family of digital organizers ‘The VoiceMate’ is here!

Not only does this current model speak every function giving the vision impaired/blind full access to all of its features. They have now fully developed a media product which was originally designed for people without disabilities into a product which is now fully accessible to vision impaired/blind users as well.

It just goes to show what can be achieved when a company listens to feedback from the whole community which develops into a win-win situation for the company’s market share and for the consumers as well.
Now I know there is one more very important thing I should have mentioned, did they fix the battery consumption and memory problem with the VoiceMate?

The answer to both of these questions is yes! As a matter of fact you even get a spoken message when the batteries are going flat, but don’t worry, if you forget and happen to take all batteries out at once, all your important data will be retained with the new non-volatile memory technology.

Ok just summing up I can’t advise you whether to buy one, that decision is up to you. All I can say is that I use a VoiceMate every day in my work and for personal use and it’s like my right arm.

If you want to find out anymore information about this product and decide for yourself just click on the link below.

http://www.voice-assistant.com/

For availability enquiries in Australia
Or any Further enquiries contact the RVIB  Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind.
Phone:  1800-458-555

All enquiries re this article please contact

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UPCOMING EVENTS

SWDN professional development workshop

Don’t miss our major workshop of the year!

**Date**

October 2004 (Bookings permitting)

**Duration**

The program will run over two days.

**How can you help??**

At this point, we need feedback on what YOU would like to participate in at this event

Suggestions should be emailed to the Editor as soon as possible. If these suggestions are not made soon, it will be impossible to consider them. We would like to finalise content and structure of the workshop at the next Management meeting which will be held on the 28th July.
MAIL BAG

Well, our inaugural issue caused quite a stir, for all the wrong reasons!

Some members thought that the joke at the end of the newsletter was in bad taste.

But that sentiment was by no means unanimous as Kylie pointed out:

"I have also a severe vision impairment. Starting my 35th year on this earth, I have found myself in the most embarrassing situations! Everyone needs to be able to laugh at oneself, otherwise, we would not be able to cope with everyday life. There is no need to apologise."

David also added to the debate “Well I enjoyed it, so there”

But controversy aside, there was still comment that some things needed to change!

Gwen noted that Steve’s technology tidbits were a bit TOO technical and that she would like to see a section where members can report on their successes (like completing study etc).

Message received Gwen! And thanks to all who wrote and emailed after the inaugural issue. We have taken your comments to heart and are working on producing an even better Newsletter in the coming issues.

ANY COMMENTS OR FEEDBACK?

Please direct these to the editor

Rebecca.loftus@det.nsw.edu.au
FAQ’s

Joining the SWDN

1 – Can anyone join the SWDN?

No - The SWDN was developed as a network for staff with a disability. Occasionally, we might invite someone with specific expertise who does not have a disability to assist us in some way. But this is temporary, and they cannot be full members.

2 – Is the SWDN open to departments other than DET state offices and TAFE?

No – Not at the moment but we are looking to expand when funds allow.

3 – Who do I need to refer people to in order to join up?

Our EO, Patricia Richardson, our Secretary, Rebecca Loftus or our satellite leaders Stephen Belbin or Berinda Karp.