

Comments on merger/takeover of Smartbox by Tobii Dynavox

I am the parent of an adult AAC user whose current device is a Tobii i-12 with Communicator 5 software (a Tobii product, to be discontinued we gather; whether related to the merger or not is unclear)

It has been extremely difficult to establish the correct AAC system, and many combinations of hardware and software had to be tried to get the most effective set-up. Without going into lots of detail, it is complicated and very personalised, in a way that simple off the shelf stuff could never be.

Advances in technology can be life-changing, however the constant need for technologies to evolve and "improve" (very much the retail model) is not always in the best interests of disabled people who need a voice; what they need is a system that works for them and is reliable and stable. I-pads and the like are great for AAC users who have the manual dexterity to manage tiny screens and icons; they are a non-starter for anyone with poor or uncontrolled fine motor skills, or who need ruggedised and robust equipment due to strong extensor spasms and/or involuntary movements.

I am therefore concerned that the drive towards increasingly consumer oriented assistive technologies means less specialist provision for those who need it most. A case in point is the increased push towards communication devices being able to do everything that a computer can do; so as well as being a person's voice it will make phone calls (either directly or by blue-tooth to a mobile phone), play music, access the internet, send emails, operate environmental controls, or act as a keyboard for another computer etc.

Undoubtedly there are advantages to some of this. However if a device is to do everything, where are the developmental priorities? Is it the actual AAC use, or is it the ability to do internet banking or having a "smart" house? And where is there more money to be made by developers?

Tobii is a very large international company with a wide reach into Europe, North America and beyond. It has ties with Microsoft in that Windows is the operating system but also Microsoft now have Tobii eye gaze software embedded in many of their products, and as has been evident in the past, Microsoft do have form for "absorbing" companies who make products which they would like to have control of, then getting rid of the bits they don't want.

Tobii are players in the specialist software market in that, for example, their Communicator 5 software was the best option in our situation but they are planning to discontinue that; also their Tobii eyegaze flagship product is essentially software, not hardware.

Smartbox is a pretty small, yet successful UK based independent company with a niche market particularly for its Grid software. But I also know of people for whom their hardware is the only viable option, but after the merger it is unclear whether any of their hardware will continue. Smartbox have a large staff support and assessment team covering a wide range of relevant professions. The implication in the original acquisition announcement from Tobii is that they will retain all this expertise, but that very much remains to be seen.

The specialist AAC market is small, and therefore it could be argued that a reduced number of operators will allow for a larger share each of the market and so of R & D possibilities. However it could very well equally reduce choice and competition to a point where basically "one size fits all"...which it so clearly doesn't in terms of AAC provision.

In the end the AAC user is at the mercy of the market and of those doing the bulk of the purchasing (the NHS or local authorities) and so the person who is affected most actually has very little influence over the market, or stakeholding in the way technology develops.

Name and address supplied