Transcript for Mike Buckley shares all on Be My Eyes and its Virtual Volunteer tool

Robin Christopherson:

Welcome to another episode of The AbilityNet podcast. Disability technology inclusion. I'm your host, Robin Christopherson, Head of Digital Inclusion at AbilityNet,a pioneering UK charity with a mission to make a digital world accessible to all. You can download a transcript of this episode from [www.abilitynet.org.uk/podcast](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/)

So, sit back, grab your favourite beverage, and let's get started.

Robin Christopherson:

Hi there, guys. Welcome back to another episode. Today, I'm talking to Mike Buckley of the brilliant app Be My Eyes, which we're going to hear a lot more about and its future in AI.

Robin Christopherson:

Welcome to another AbilityNet podcast. This is a really special one for me, but also for many, many listeners and viewers who are visually impaired or who are in any way, shape or form. Interested in the area of vision impairment and AI because Be My Eyes is an app that, even if it wasn't undergoing a major revolution that we will be talking about today would be worthy of being featured on a podcast because Be My Eyes has revolutionised the lives of people with low or no vision for several years now, and I'm talking to Mike Buckley, who is CEO of Be My Eyes an absolutely brilliant organisation that I have used as a blind person for many years now. Mike, thank you so much for joining us.

Mike Buckley:

Robin, thank you so much for having me in for the kind words about Be My Eyes.

Robin Christopherson:

It's been a really busy time for you. I'm aware of that. So we'll see how the long this goes, but I really appreciate your giving us your time to talk about Be My Eyes. Now, if people haven't heard of Be My Eyes, do you wanna give just their elevator pitch or the kind of two-minute summary of what it's been doing for people for quite a few years now?

Mike Buckley:

Sure it was started by a Danish furniture Craftsman named Hans Wiberg, who has low vision and got tired of constantly having to call his friends to ask questions. And so he launched this beautiful app into the world, and all it does for free is connect someone who's blind or low vision with the cited volunteer on a one way video call.

So the volunteer can see the video that's held up by the blind or low vision person, to figure out what the expiration date on the milk is, or where the green sweater is. Or maybe it's even “am I at the right airport gate?” I had a a lovely experience where I read a woman her holiday cards and described the, described the pictures on them. And so, so it connects, it connects blind and low vision with sighted volunteers, and we operate in 150 countries and 180 languages. The calls are over 90% successful and an overwhelming majority of both the blind and vision community as well as the volunteers love the experience, and so I like to say it's this beautiful merging of technology and human kindness.

Robin Christopherson:

Brilliant summary. Yeah, I mean, it's such a game changer if you haven't got a pair of eyes handy and you don't want to be imposing on friends or you haven't got, you know that person that you can do a FaceTime call or a a video call with, then those volunteers are ready, willing and able. And I don't know who gets more out of the interchange, the the blind person, the visually impaired person or the volunteer because it really makes their day, doesn't it?

Mike Buckley:

It's a great point, Robin, because it's it's literally the volunteers talk about it as the best day of their week. It's it's, it's joy. It produces joy for them and it's it produces success for the for the person who has, you know, wants some assistance.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah. For me that 90% is 100, a 100% of the calls to Be My Eyes have been completely successful for me and I've found out you know how many minutes there are left on the dishwasher. You know whether the washing machine has finished its cycle, where on Earth have I put my X? Whatever X is, there's, you know that doesn't changes day by day.

Just finding things when you're blind. If if it's one centimetre out of the sweep of your reach when you've been, you know, looking for it for the last 2 1/2 minutes then you know it might as well not be in the same room.

But the Be My Eyes volunteers can effortlessly find what you need or tell you what you need. It's so brilliant.

So how? What are the numbers? You can you give us some numbers at the moment you mentioned about countries and languages, but how many users, how many volunteers, how many calls a day?

Mike Buckley:

Yeah. What a great question. We are about to hit a half a million users. I think it'll be next week, which is a remarkable we think it's the largest community of blind and low vision in the world. And there are an astonishing 6.5 million volunteers, which literally is the largest digital volunteer army in the world and it's you know, anytime I feel cynical about the world or I'm I'm upset about something that I need in the news, I think about that. The fact that six and a half million people have volunteered to give their time to assist another human being and it and it makes me feel great and we get more than 3000 calls a day to volunteers.

But also, interestingly, you know, I think you know Robin, we have a product called specialised help that links up our community directly with customer service organisations on a video call with Microsoft or Sony, or Spotify, or Procter and Gamble, who are all clients of ours. And there are thousands of those calls a day as well and so it's it's a, it's a platform that is very highly used and and being used more and more every day.

Robin Christopherson:

Great. I did want to get onto the specialised help, but I just wanna say for anyone that is visually impaired or print impaired as well. Who's thinking that this would be some sort of imposition in using this system. You know you don't want to bother the people. They might be busy. You know, we can put people's fears or concerns to rest because, you know, if someone doesn't pick up straight away.

It goes on to the next volunteer and like you said it really makes people's day and if anything, the biggest challenge I think you've had is actually getting enough calls to make the volunteers feel really engaged and you know, it can take a while for a volunteer to get their first call, can't it?

Mike Buckley

It's absolutely true. It's the biggest complaint on the platform. Volunteers want more calls and and Robin, you you've made a really astute point and that is, you know, we've done research on our community and our members and the two biggest barriers to making a call are one they don't want to take a volunteer away from someone who might need them more right, which is a lovely and beautiful thing, but it's absolutely not a fear you have to worry about when they have six and a half million people and the 2nd is, is, as you said, you just feel like maybe you're bothering someone.

You know, but it's not it, you're giving that volunteer joy, and I can't stress that enough.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah, unfailingly the, the tone that the volunteers have or adopt, well not adopt, but kind of you know, naturally have when when they answer a call is surprise and delight, you know.

Ohh it's my turn. I'm going to help someone you know and they really, really helpful. And they can be on for a few seconds. They could be on for whole minutes.

You know, it's it. It depends what you need, but obviously the idea is kind of short form instant help. Except when we're talking about specialised support. So yeah, you mentioned a few there. Please do let people know how that works and what sort of specialised help?

I mean obviously it depends on the organisation in question. But yeah, do you wanna say a little bit more about the specialised help channels?

Mike Buckley:

Sure, it's an, it's a separate button in the app. So there's one button that is to call the volunteer and the next is to call companies that are on our platform and utilise us to connect with their customer service department.

We have over 30 businesses and organisations on there right now, and it's really growing. Every month we'll have some exciting announcements over the next couple of months for new clients, but one that that we just announced 2 days ago is Sky Ireland, the big broadcaster and and all. It's very simple.

You, you know if if you have a Google product that you're, you know, you need tech support on or you're having difficulty with you press the button and you get immediately linked up to Google support, who again, it's a one way video call to help solve your needs.

Maybe you're having a problem with your Microsoft tablet. Maybe you're having a problem with organising playlists on Spotify. Perhaps you have questions about Procter and Gamble shampoo and whether or not it has allergens in it or something like that.

And so we connect you directly with that company to have customers support. And again over 90% success rate. And Robin, to your point, when you said you had 100% success, it's often the failures that occur are a result of of technology or telecommunications right, it's very rare that a call ends up failing because either a volunteer or the customer service person wasn't able to help. So these, you know, it works really well.

One thing I would ask your listeners, Robin is you know, if you work at a company that doesn't work with Be My Eyes call me, e-mail me, let's figure something out. We'd love to work with more and more companies and I think ultimately, you know our CTO, yes, but he always says “We're doing good things in the world, but we're not doing enough”.

Like until we're, I'm going to date myself here, but until we're the Yellow Pages, that until we're a directory of thousands of companies, that a person who's blind or low vision can call just by using their voice, like we've got work to do you know, yeah.

Robin Christopherson:

So yeah, I should say as well, just to really spell it out in case people aren't aware at this point what we're talking about is.

The back facing camera firing up as soon as you connect, so it's not the front facing camera, so you know it's not gonna be instantly you're on camera and you know you need to. I don't know. Be conscious of what you look like or anything.

So it fires up the back facing camera and you point it at what you need, whether it's a product or some help with indoor navigation and that might be something that businesses you know, with retail establishments what might want to leverage it for to be able to have people who know the way around particular, you know layouts of shops or branches or whatever it might be, airports, anything like that where you know anything that you need a pair of eyes to understand read, navigate. You know, that's the kind of thing we're talking about, right?

Mike Buckley:

Exactly, exactly. The use cases are literally they're almost, almost limitless, right?

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah. And until we have AI that compares to human intelligence, then that's, you know, the use case we talking about here, anything that you need a pair of eyes and some intelligence behind it for which kind of brings us on to the next, you know, the the kind of elephant in the room here, which is what?

Be My Eyes is developing, has been beta testing with some lucky testers and that will be coming out soon, which is kind of a virtual version of volunteers. You know, that will give well you you you know go for it listen.

Mike Buckley:

I mean it's it's we're working with open AI and as you said, we've got a beta test going on right now. Where in the user can take a picture of pretty much anything and within a matter of three to five seconds, you get a full description, description of what's in that picture.

It could be a menu, it could be an airport terminal and you know, or the, othe the list of flight departures in an airport. I took one of my daughter playing a video game in the living room.

And it was I was way back in the corner and it said, oh, that's a game called Fortnite. And it gave me all this information. And then I said, “Can you translate that into Hindi for me?” And it did.

So, it's, it's it really is a state of the art visual recognition tool that provides me a real time information. I have been blown away by it. I think our beta testers.

Let me back up. I I've said this both on podcasts and and elsewhere. I'm I'm very, very wary of over promising and I'm very, very wary of the artificial intelligence hype cycle that we're in right now.

However, when you talk to the beta testers, they use phrases like life changing. 1 beta tester said, “Wow, I have a chance to get my independence back.” Another beta tester got emotional, incredibly emotional when he said I this is the first time in four years I can go on my Instagram feed and enjoy it with my family and friends, because I'm getting descriptions of of these images. And so what separates this particular technology from the very good technology that's out there, whether it's lookout or seeing AI or whatever it is.

The visual recognition is superior, right? There's a depth and granularity to it, and an accuracy to it that is above and beyond anything in the marketplace. And 2nd is you can converse with it. So, after you take your initial picture, you can ask it a question on voice over, “tell me more about this.” “Where can I buy this?” ”What is the price point” etcetera. And and so it gives you the ability to go back and forth and mine additional information from the image.

Oh and you can also upload more than one image by the way, for description purposes. And then the the the final thing is.

Is if and when the tool fails, if and when the AI can't get an accurate enough answer or an answer that either satisfies you or it. And by the way, it says sometimes I'm only 90% sure I'm right on this. It says, would you like to call a volunteer? So it's it has a seamless rollover mechanism for if and when it's not, it's not performing well and so we're incredibly excited about this, Robin, I think the future is very, very promising and unbelievably interesting in terms of where this goes and I hope we can talk about that a little bit.

But but as you said, it's in beta now. We're expanding the beta every day for more and more people, but it's it's an incredibly exciting time.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah, absolutely.

00:15:33 Robin Christopherson

And like you mentioned you know other apps that have optical character recognition or object recognition capabilities. This is not just the next level, but like 18 levels up.

It's just absolutely breathtaking and I've I've listened to so many demos of people showing, you know, putting it through its paces.

With an app that I would normally be using on my phone, you know if I want to snap a menu in a restaurant then it just reads the whole thing top to bottom and sometimes it doesn't even recognise the columns if it's a two column menu or you're looking at you know, you snapped both sides of, you know, 2 pages adjacent pages and it might read right across, but still you've got this linear top to bottom and you know if you mishear or you want to go back. It's really difficult to kind of interrogate or get meaningful information or to dig out one bit of information from a massive, you know, morass of info that it's just snapped for you if assuming it it's kind of done a successful job of the recognition of the text, but this just seems to be so brilliant. You know, you can snap a massive menu which has all the, you know, start all Hors D'oeuvre starters, main courses, desserts, et cetera. And then you can just query it like you said you know you can just say, “what have you got that's vegan” or “what is there that is under £5” or “list me the desserts that are under 300 calories”, whatever it might be and you're basically having a conversation with what feels like a human or something with human level intelligence. You know, the Turing test has been passed 8000 times over with, with ChatGPT and you know, we've probably all had eye opening accounts or or first hand experience with what ChatGPT has done and that's what this is based on.

And it sounds like you have a relationship with open AI, which means that the feedback you're garnering from your testers can go straight back into that large language model to actually improve, you know the finding of objects that might be specific to the VI community, like a, a cane or a dog's harness or whatever it might be, or you know use cases that are very specific to us. So that sounds really amazing as well.

Mike Buckley:

It is. It is remarkable. And by the way, open AI has been an unbelievable partner to work with and you're absolutely right, Robin. We are feeding back information importantly information about when we have failures, right.

It's not good, at telling you where the buttons are or the proper button on a remote so you know, or you know your TV remote control may have 15 different buttons and sometimes it it mislocates them or it gives you the wrong location of the button. So that's something that we're working on actively.

And that ability to iterate and and improve the model is everything right? Because it has implications for safety and has implications for efficacy. And so the ability to make it better and better is a key component of what we're doing and also a key benefit of having this beta tester group who are really helping us on a daily basis and informing us and you know someone told me, Bryan Bashin who's the vice chair of Be My Eyes, who is president of the San Francisco Lighthouse for the blind. And it's just a brilliant, brilliant guy, he said. “Mike, you know, too often technology has been thrust upon blind people right and don't do something for me. Do something with me.” Right? And so the iteration process, the development process, it is directly with the Community because it's going to shape the technology and where it goes or as Brian says, it'll help bend the technology to to his needs.

Robin Christopherson:

I think it's so brilliant cause obviously there are major concerns with AI at the moment. Like any tool and this one is very is proving to be a very sophisticated ever advancing tool.

It can be used for good purposes or ill, and this is definitely a good news story, isn't it? So this is, this is definitely on the kind of doing good balanced side of the scale. So you know, this is such a good news story. It's really, really amazing.

So let's talk about next steps really, because this is advancing so quickly and I have heard on other interviews that you've given, that you're hopeful that, you know, we'll see other major advances in the future, perhaps going from analysing still images to live video feed support where the AI gives you real time information and by the time this podcast goes out, we'll have heard what Apple has to offer in this area.

Probably VR at the moment and they're kind of AR offering won't be out for a couple of years yet.

But we've had Google Glass, we've got envision AI glasses, et cetera. You know, there are various other smart glasses out there and that for me is, you know, the kind of golden goal for artificial intelligence as a blind person is just to be able to have something that is always working for me, always helping me, always ensuring that I'm aware of what's around me and giving me, you know, salient, intelligent, succinct information that it knows that I would want to know and no more and no less. So yeah, talk about what your aspirations are for you know how, Be My Eyes might be used in six months, five years time.

Mike Buckley:

Yeah, I I and I I won't give an exact time frame because we're going to go where the the data leads us and the technology leads us and and obviously prioritising safety. But Robin, you said it, I think I will be very unhappy if within, say, to hopefully two years, maybe two to three years.

If we don't have a wearable that helps our community interpret their environment and real time, that's going to be a bit of a disappointment.

That's where this has to go, right? Where you have something hands free, by the way, it may be glasses.

I think that this company Humane and what they're doing with it, looks really interesting where it almost looks like something you might wear in a breast pocket or could clip on a jacket or something like that .

Where, there, there's a a hands free lens that it helps interpret the visual world around you. And as you said, video ultimately with video in real time and that that's where we want this to go and so this is, I hope, a positive, a positive step forward in that evolution. Well, I hope it's faster than evolution, so it's more of a revolution. But that that's where this has to go.

Now there are people that will tell you eventually that this will be an implant.That's above my pay grade, Robin. I don't know about you, but I I I think the prospect of, you know, putting something in my skin or having surgery. I I don't know if I'm ready to take that leap just yet, but it's certainly plausible.

But I but I think in the nearer term our goal is to get is to make this software beautiful,workable, seamless, fast, vibrant and then be able to to put it on any wearable device that the consumer wants.

Robin Christopherson:

I mean, I'm definitely holding out for, you know, prosthetic. Well, robotic eyes at some point in the future that offer more than, like, just a checkerboard, you know, resolution.

But who knows, maybe in the future. But until that comes, I'm just really excited about something that will just whisper in my ear and you know, like my wife does. I'm never happier than when I have, you know, Judith, next to me with a working pair of eyes who's just always got my back and telling me what's what, making sure I avoid things. You know, reading things out for me, saying interesting things about what we're passing, giving the audio description in the theatre, whatever it might be an equivalent of that for everybody is just, you know, I'll settle for that for the foreseeable future. And it sounds like, you know we're seeing it in, seeing it in Be My Eyes’s Virtual Volunteer.

Whatever that might end up being called, I know that that's still got a question mark over it in its kind of initial implementation in the coming weeks or you know months to come when it comes out of trial.

But yeah, like you say, I would be disappointed as well, if not in a few years time we've got something that's far more instant, real time, supportive. Yeah. Really, really exciting. And I'm sure that that will be delivered through Be My Eyes.

And as the app as the service, whatever the peripheral that it's, you know, feeding that information through might be. But yeah, really, really exciting.

Mike Buckley:

I think so too, Robin. And and you can envision also where, where, you know, as you said, there's there's video in real time, but, but you ought to be able to package elements from a host of disparate services in one place, right, internal navigation and mapping like routes. You can, you know, bring in flight information or train departure information all at once, or and and like, I think that's where we need to head, you know this better than me it's, t can be frustrating having to go to, you know, five or six different places to get the information you need.

And so I, you know, I I'm encouraged by what we're seeing right now with a lot of our business partners and the conversations that were happening that are happening to kind of put this, what I would call you know, forward Visual Digital assistant functionality in one place.

Robin Christopherson:

And we should say that, you know, even though it might be a photo or in the future video, that kind of kicks off the the conversation with the virtual assistant. After that, you've got the full power of open AI's technology behind it, so you know you might have just shown the the departures board at the airport, but after that you can say ohh you know what's the weather gonna be like in the destination. Or you know what eating facilities are there in this airport and that doesn't have to be visually available to you right there, it can go away and find that information for you and it would all be able to grab a plan at the airport at the same time and it will be able to then direct you that sort of thing.

Mike Buckley:

Right.

Robin Christopherson:

So yeah, it's already much, much more than kind of maybe what we've been.

Mike Buckley:

Yeah, or maybe your flight to Glasgow was cancelled and you go to the board and you say I need to buy a ticket to another flight. What's available, and then connect me to, you know, go buy the ticket and it's that. I think that's coming. Think it's coming.

Robin Christopherson:

Wow. Brilliant. So I think we've given people a tiny taste of how exciting the prospect of what we're talking about here and how Be My Eyes is going to be, right at the forefront of, of this for you know this like you say, revolution for people who are visually impaired, print impaired, you know with other cognitive impairments as well.This is going to be an absolute game changer, so anything else to add or should we just go to where people can find out more about.

Mike Buckley:

I think, yeah. You just sign up for the waiting list if you can and it's right through the app itself.

If you don't have the app, you can just download it from any of the app stores.

I hope Robin that you know, we can launch this in general availability within you know, a few months. I I think you've heard but just so your listeners know you know.

We don't have a date on launch yet, and that's because we're trying to be very respectful of the data that we're getting back from the testing because again, no matter what, we're going to prioritise safety and efficacy above all. And when we, when we are even more convinced, I'm already feel pretty good about it from a safety and efficacy standpoint, but when it gets even stronger and when it gets to the point where I I think the failures or hallucinations, as they're sometimes called in the in the tech talk are minimised, I think that's when we'll try to launch this into the world. But I I hope it's within a few months.

Robin Christopherson:

Great. Yeah. And. And when you say a few months you know you actually mean it. I know that you've been, you know, tied to a a given kind of quarter this year.

But yeah, we're really talking about definitely this year, if not, you know, in the coming months. So yeah, really, really exciting. How can people find out more, where you know you just download the app.

Mike Buckley:

Exactly, exactly. And that there is additional information on our website as well if you're interested. It's just bemyeyes.com.

But like I said, not a lot of sleeping these days, but that's OK, incredibly exciting and and thank you for for having me on Robin.

Robin Christopherson:

Thank you so much, Mike.

That's a free app. It's a free service. It's absolutely amazing.

Keep up the great work, Mike. And yeah, sorry to add to your workload, but I'm sure other people will be wanting to get a piece of you to to tell, you know, to cover what we've been talking about today. It's exciting times.

Mike Buckley:

Appreciate the time very much. Thank you. Thanks.

Robin Christopherson:

With our goal to make the digital world accessible to all, our volunteers, play a crucial part. We have over 350 volunteers across the UK that help disabled adults and older people with their technology and digital devices. They do home visits or can help over the phone

With every new volunteer we get a little bit closer to reaching our goal of making a digital world accessible to all. So why not become an AbilityNey volunteer and help in your community? Find out more about volunteering at www.abilitynet.org.uk/volunteers.

Thanks again for tuning in and more hot discussions around accessibility will be coming soon.