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CUT PRICE COMPUTING 

GPS navigation guide for blind trialled

20.03.2007 - Italian technology company Il Village is breaking new ground with a GPS navigation system designed to guide the blind.

The Easy Walk service uses a small Bluetooth device in conjunction with a mobile phone that runs the Symbian operating system and a text-to-speech program called Talks.

Along with a 24-hour call service, this complete package will tell the user exactly where they are and give them directions to where they want to go.

The system uses two dedicated keys on the mobile phone. One button tells the user where he or she is, down to the exact house or building number; the other button contacts the call service to notify the operators of the user's need for navigation assistance.

On receiving the call, the operator gives the user step-by-step instructions on how to get to their destination and stays on the phone until they get there.

Andrea de Paoli, technology officer for Il Village, said that aside from the technology, the human contact provided by the 24-hour call centre is an important feature of this system.

Although the system currently uses Talks as their text-to-speech software, the system will allow for other competing programs to be used also.

Currently the system is being tested by a group of 30 people from the Italian Blind Union who are providing necessary user feedback before the service is fully launched. The launch will be in Piedmont in northern Italy sometime in the Autumn.

Elio Federici, head of mobile telecommunications for the Piedmont Regional Government, estimates that the service will cost approximately €442 per person but is hoping that it will eventually become a free service. Sponsorship and partnership are now being sought before Easy Walk is made generally available.

By Marie Boran

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