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### GPS navigation plan to help blind

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**An Italian technology company is pioneering a GPS satellite system that will give blind people greater independence and mobility.**



The Easy Walk service has been developed by Il Village, a firm in Turin in northern Italy.

It is currently being tested by a group of 30 people from the Italian Blind Union who are providing feedback. The plan is for Easy Walk to be launched to blind and partially sighted people in Piedmont in the autumn.

Easy Walk uses a mobile phone that runs the Symbian operating system, a small Bluetooth GPS receiver, text to speech software called Talks (though rival products are also compatible) and a call centre that will operate around the clock seven days a week.

It requires just two dedicated keys on the mobile phone - one which, when pressed, tells the user their exact location including the house or building number and the other one alerts the call centre that the person needs assistance with navigation.

An operator will then call the blind person, find out where it is they need to go and stay on the line with them providing step by step instructions.

Easy Walk is the brainchild of Andrea de Paoli, Il Village's technology officer.

"What is really important is that behind all that stuff there is a call centre with a human being that can help you and who understands your needs," he said.

**'Guardian angel'**

This is a concept that Mr de Paoli refers to as having a "guardian angel" who makes sure that anyone using the system gets to where they need to go.

Because Easy Walk uses digital maps, in theory the call centre staff would be able to provide guidance to a user anywhere in Europe.

The system has already been tested across the border in France and Switzerland.

The first phase of the project has resulted in 95% accuracy in determining a user's exact location and Mr de Paoli intends to rebuild the system from scratch for the second phase of testing to achieve 100% reliability.

"Easy Walk is very important to help me to go to the places that I don't know," said Federico Borgna who is leading the group of 30 testers from the Italian Blind Union.

"It gives me more confidence because I usually walk by myself but I have to know the way - Easy Walk helps me to go where I don't know the way."



Mr Borgna also uses the technology on trains or trams to pinpoint his exact location in order to know when to get off.

Thanks to the feedback of Mr Borgna and his colleagues, the system is now able to deliver information in a way that is most useful for blind people.

"If the call centre tells you that you have to go straight on for 200m and then turn right, for me this has no meaning," he said.

"For me it is important that you tell me that I have to go for two blocks, cross two streets and then turn right - I know when I am crossing a street but I don't know what 200m is."

The trial phase has been financed by the regional administration of Piedmont which has invested £50,000 but it is now looking for partners or sponsors before Easy Walk is made generally available this year.

"This region is doing its best to bring about a free service," said Elio Federici head of mobile telecommunications for the Piedmont Regional Government.

"Our idea - and the philosophy of our president, Mercedes Bresso - is that this service should be free of charge to the end user."

Mr Federici estimates that the service will cost approximately £300 per person to implement.

Il Village has already set up another call centre service - Easy Contact - that makes phone calls on behalf of deaf people who have no speech who send in requests by text message.

Other regions of Italy have already bought the service and Il Village is hoping for similar success to follow the launch of Easy Walk.