

## ATN Interviews Lon S. Safko

**ATN:** When did Safko International begin?

**Safko:** Safko International began with its first product The SoftVoice System in December 1985. SoftVoice was first installed in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Yakima Washington in February, 1986. The name SoftVoice, is a computer industry type concatenation meaning voice-activated software. We actually pioneered the world's first voice-activated, environmental control system for people.

**ATN:** What is Safko's mission?

**Safko:** Our mission has always been focused: produce the most sophisticated technology in the world for disabled people, make it the easiest in the world to use, and keep the price as low as possible.

**ATN:** How does the SenSei System work?

**Safko:** Pretty well! It actually works quite easily. A cable from the computer, a telephone line from the wall and it's running in just a few minutes. The software presents pictures that represent familiar objects such as, a room with a desk, a bookshelf, a ceiling fan, etc. If you wanted to place a telephone call, you simply look at the desk, see the phone and click on it. The screen changes to a picture of a telephone keypad with three additions: an Answer, Hang Up, and Dial button. Just click the buttons and it works the way a real telephone works. The Server provides for the speakerphone or hands-free telephone use. The speaker in the Server acts as a speakerphone, while the Server listens with its microphone to relay the other side of the conversation. This is sounding less easy than it is... Click Answer,

talk and listen. That's how it works.

The SenSei System will do more than control just a telephone. It will control up to 256 lamps and appliances-on, off, dim. It'll control security systems, heating and ventilation, ceiling fans, through a closed circuit radio signal. That means that it will require *no* special wiring. Plug it in and it works.

SenSei also controls things

like an e l e c t r o n i c hospital bed-head up, down; height up, down; or knee up, d o w n . It'll control any infrared device known to man. If it has a hand held remote control, SenSei will control it: T V s , V C R s , cable, stereos, CDs, satellite dishes, video players, anything!

**ATN:** Who are your clients?

**Safko:** Our clients vary a great deal. It's like asking IBM or Apple who their clients are-it's everyone. Only in our case, it's everyone with a disability who wants to access a computer. The best way to describe our customers is to site a few examples: Liz is a woman with multiple sclerosis who uses SenSei in her home to control her environment and

write books. She is working on her life story about her disability but more important, her abilities. Skipp is an incomplete quad who has used SenSei to assist him in completing his high school education, while Miklos is currently using SenSei while attending high school in the northwest.

Rehabilitation hospitals and medical centers have embraced our product warmly. It's the

p r i m a r y goal of most care facilities, to provide the best care and latest technology for their clients. When they see the capabilities of our SenSei System-how it can r e d u c e their c o n t i n u o u s care needs, and how it aides in the rehabilitation of their disabled

clients-they immediately recognize its value.

Our most exciting application of the technology however, has been the workplace. One of our first goals was to employ physically disabled people in quality positions.

One example of this technology's employment application is Joe. Joe was a firefighter for one of the southwest's major cities. While fighting a fire, Joe sustained an injury which re-

sulted in him becoming an incomplete quadriplegic. His life was the fire department. By using the SenSei technology, he regained his employment not just in any job but in the Fire Support Services in that city.

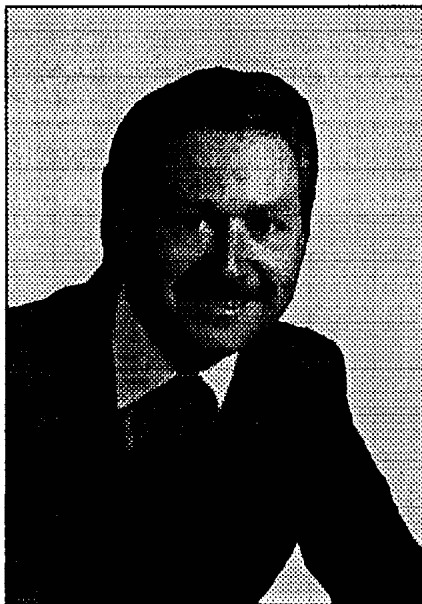
Another example is Franklin. He is a complete quad who a few years earlier was a ward of the state, confined to a bed in a nursing home. Now Franklin is an employed taxpayer, using SenSei and his natural artistic talents to perform graphic design, desktop publishing, marketing, and correspondence, for a large southwest university.

With the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the requests for information regarding our product has more than quadrupled over the past two years. With such terms as reasonable accommodations and other mandates within the ADA, we anticipate a great deal of activity with our SenSei product within corporate American.

We have dozens of clients that are currently using the SenSei System, but we have others that use some selected components, such as the Sentence Construction Set, or just the Dialer.

We also have several SenSei Systems operating abroad, in particular, Scandinavia. We have been working with the government of Sweden and to some extent, Norway over the past couple of years. SenSei has been translated into Swedish and is running in Stockholm and Nynasham.

The other qualifier is we have focused primarily on research, development and field testing since 1988. We wanted to be sure that we had a product that satisfied the market and was exceptionally reliable. It wasn't



*Lon S. Safko  
President / CEO of Safko  
International, Inc.*

until just this year that we chose to market and sell SenSei.

**ATN:** What are your best products?

**Safko:** Each of our products have been designed by the providers of care to the disabled population or by the disabled themselves. All of our electronics are solid state and reliable. And each of the software products were designed for specific applications.

Our PowerNow was designed specifically for 9-volt, portability for use on a PowerBook laptop, to control the users environmental, telephone, and infrared devices. The SenSei System increases the overall capabilities while remaining stationary.

Recognition was designed for cognitive rehabilitation, and Type Talker gives speech to the speechless. I'm proud of each of our products for its own merits.

**ATN:** How long is someone trained on your system?

**Safko:** I like that question. Even though we provide a whole day training with the SenSei System, it's rarely necessary. During the 1980's, I taught "Introduction to Microcomputers" to 100's of people. Nearly all had never used a computer before. It gave me a perspective of what it takes to make a computer system really *user friendly*.

We developed a software system that's completely pictured based. When you look at our "Home" screen you see things like a ceiling fan for environmental control or a telephone representing telecommunications. If you want to use the phone, you click on the phone. It's that easy. So our software has virtually no learning curve. Our clients sit in front of SenSei and start using it.

**ATN:** What do you see as the

potential for people with disabilities using your product?

**Safko:** The potential? What was the potential of the transistor, integrated circuitry or computer? Because the people using our products our disabled almost immediately become transparent, and should, if we did our job. The potential of our clients is and has been, unlimited. We have a client completely paralyzed writing children's books, designs art. The synergistic relationship of technology and human mind are truly limitless.

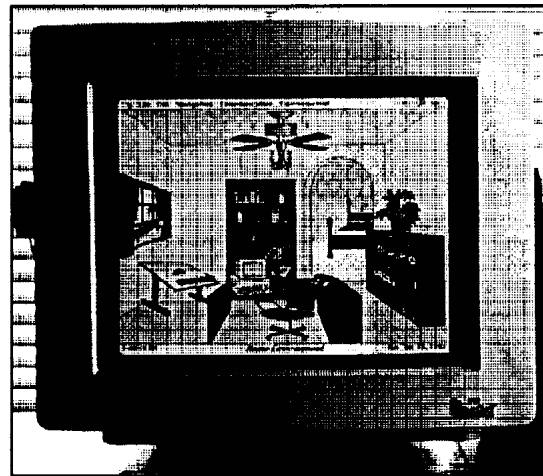
**ATN:** Would you define Assistive Technology for our readers?

**Safko:** Broad brush, technology that assists disabled users in performing a given task. But, I think the real definition is providing the tools necessary to allow anyone the opportunity to achieve their best. Assistive technology to me is my using a wrench. We could never adequately tighten a bolt with our bare fingers, but with the right tools we can create what our minds only could imagine. For the disabled population those tools might be a little different. The results are the same, to achieve our best.

**ATN:** Managers are reluctant to employ disabled people. From your experience is there a valid reason today for refusing to hire a disabled person who can use your Assistive technology?

**Safko:** Absolutely not! Sure there are some restrictions that accompany some disabilities, but none of them are insurmountable. I think they should carry no more weight than educational or experience-related restrictions when hiring

**ATN:** What are some of the products used by disabled people in the job market?



*The SenSei Screen.*

**Safko:** Again the answer relates back to what are the products everyone using computer technology are using-everything. Once we've bridged the disability, it becomes transparent. Our clients are using our systems the same way everyone else is, word processing, spreadsheets, graphics, desktop publishing. You name it, they're doing it.

**ATN:** One of the concerns we hear from employers for refusing to hire a disabled person is the cost of providing reasonable accommodations. How expensive is it to develop a work site or provide 'reasonable accommodations' to disabled people?

**Safko:** That's a really subjective question. What does a computer cost? What does a car cost? It depends on what you're looking for. Our systems start at \$995 and can exceed \$15,000. Sometimes with our modified track ball or another input device, we can provide reasonable accommodations for just a few hundred dollars, sometimes it requires more. When you assess cost, remember to consider State and Federal credits that can offset and sometimes cover the entire cost of accommodations.

Also, whatever costs the employer incurs should be offset by what they would spend on non-disabled accommodations. Would they need to supply a standard computer to that employer if

not disabled? It's *that* difference that defines the cost of accommodations.

**ATN:** What is the future for technology and its benefits to disabled people?

**Safko:** It's the future of technology. Every time some big corporation, or entrepreneur somewhere in the world develops a new piece of technology, everyone benefits. Just look at the past 10 years, microwave cooking, cellular telephones, VCRs, Cable television, CDs & computers. This is a lot of technology we already take for granted. What technology will we take for granted 10 years from now?

**ATN:** If someone wanted to contact your company for assistance, whom should they contact?

**Safko:** Me, or anyone on our staff. Our address is Safko International, Inc., 1438 West Broadway, Suite B240, Tempe, AZ 85282, and our telephone number is (602) 731-9805, FAX (602) 731-9835. Someone is available most all of the time. When there's not, there's always our voice mail. Don't you just love technology?