

# Inventor seeks seed money to blossom

## Kennewick man's project stalled for lack of funds

By Erik Smith  
Herald staff writer

A good idea and a clever invention aren't all that success requires, a Kennewick man is learning.

Lon Safko has developed an innovative voice-activated computer system for quadraplegics, but the world hasn't exactly been beating a path to his garage. He says the search for venture capital makes the actual inventing look easy.

"If I don't get it out to market soon, somebody's going to cut my throat," he laments.

Safko is one of about 20 entrepreneurs who have applied for seed money through Westinghouse's Tri-Cities Investment Management Co. Westinghouse has pledged to provide \$5 million in seed money to promote local enterprise and economic diversification.

Westinghouse made the pledge as part of its successful bid to assume with Boeing Computer Services the \$4 billion Hanford operations contract July 1. Investment company president Ralph DiSibio said he expects to announce Westinghouse's first few investments this week.

The scrutinization of Safko's proposal is typical, DiSibio said. Westinghouse employees with expertise in artificial intelligence and medical technology have been studying it for weeks.

"The product is ingenious," DiSibio said. "I don't see anything else on the market today that can compete with him."

On the other hand, he said the system is fairly sophisticated - it can require individual tailoring, and the quadraplegic market is limited. DiSibio isn't making any promises.

Safko was a salesman at Alpha Computer a year ago when a customer told him he knew of no inexpensive, effective computer system designed for quadraplegics. Some systems require users to hold a stick in their mouths and peck like a chicken. Others used an expensive and uncomfortable eyeball scanner. That started Safko thinking.

He'd been wondering about the possibility of a voice-activated computer ever since inexpensive voice recognition programs and hardware started hitting the market about two years ago. Business was slow, and Safko threw himself into program development. Incomparable commands kept canceling each other out.

"After about an hour of crying," he said, "I'd start all over again."

After a month, the "SoftVoice" system was ready: An Apple IIE computer was equipped with voice recognition circuits and modules capable of such simple tasks as turning on the lights with the command "light on."

Safko could dial a phone by reciting a telephone number. By spelling out words, he could dictate notes and write letters. He designed voice-command programs for 40 computer games.

Safko convinced St. Mary's Medical Center in Walla Walla and St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Yakima to give it a try. Beth Wasson, occupational therapy supervisor at the Yakima hospital, said the machine was "really kind of a godsend."

Her staff tried it with two patients who had become paralyzed in accidents and had poor hand functions. One

showed little interest, but Wasson said the system helped lift the other's spirits and reverse his withdrawal.

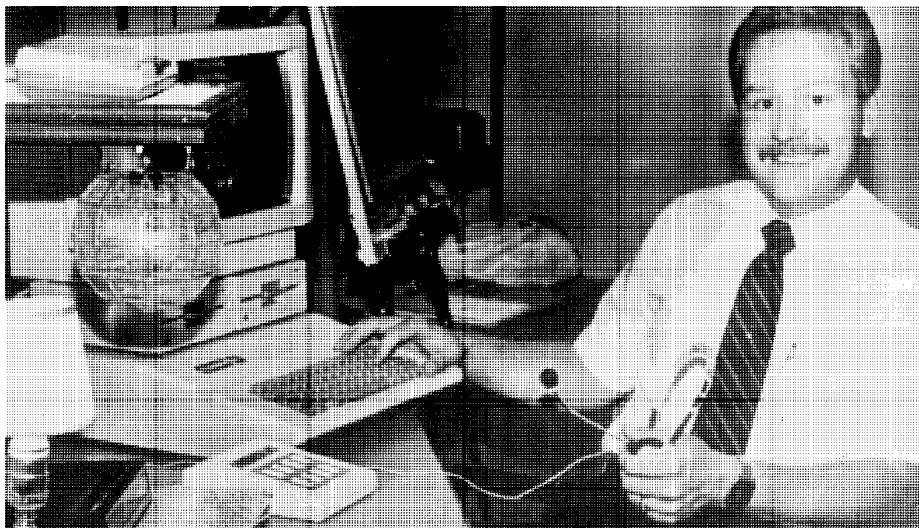
Safko recalled, "They were practically singing. The guy was doing good, taking his medicine, working on the computer."

And just before the man was released from the hospital, Safko said, "the son-of-a-gun reached out and shook my hand."

Wasson said the system "has great potential, particularly for quadraplegics who are unable to use their hands. They can't turn on a light, can't turn on a TV, can't open a door. To be able to do these things means a tremendous amount to a person."

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— Beth Wasson,  
St. Elizabeth Medical Center



Lon Safko, one of about 20 entrepreneurs who have applied for seed money through Westinghouse's Tri-Cities Investment Management Co., sits in front of his voice-activated computer system.

Dr. Alan Brightman, director of special education at Apple Computer, concurs on the potential of Safko's concept, and not just for quadraplegics.

"I think it has real legitimate application" to the non-handicapped market, he said in a telephone interview from the company's Cupertino, Calif., headquarters. "Consider the curb-cuts on the sidewalks, put there for disabled people. Who uses them most? The people who aren't disabled."

Brightman said Safko isn't the first to design his own programs to take advantage of off-the-shelf voice-activated components. An Irvine, Calif., firm called The Voice Connection has been selling such systems since the early '80's.

President Sharda Cartwright said the firm has a similar environmental control system for quadraplegics, as well as telephone and word processing programs. Another program converts spoken words to commands and data suited for any IBM or Apple program, with applications for oral-reading drills, inventory counts, meter reading and other tasks.

Brightman said Safko's system worked well during a brief demonstration last December, but said his biggest problem is "the reality of the marketplace, where many of the people making third-party products are independent or small companies which cannot deliver their products in large numbers."

DiSibio said the Westinghouse investment company will probably make a decision by mid-August. Even if Safko is turned down, he said Westinghouse will provide advice and try to put him in touch with investors. "We're here to assist in lots of ways" DiSibio said.

Safko admits he could use some help. He sold only three of the systems before he had to sell the rest of his computer equipment to stay afloat. Though he started a job with Westinghouse two weeks ago, he said the SoftVoice project is his first love.

And if the Westinghouse deal falls through, Safko says he'll keep trying.

"It's a worthwhile project," he said, "and I'm not going to let it die."