

Mike Munden/Dispatch photos

Technical developers David Lutz, left, and Richard M. Volkers instruct a voice-activated computer at AT&T Bell Laboratories in Columbus.

Voice-activated phones move ahead

■ *AT&T releases latest speech-recognition product.*

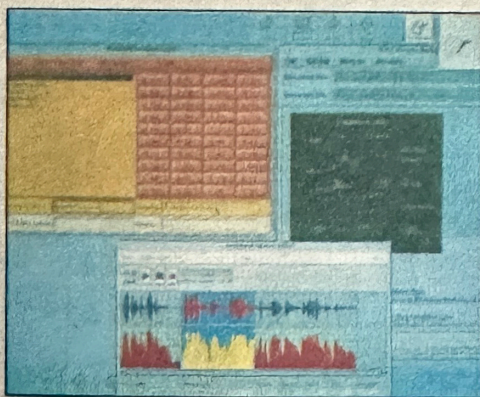
By Ron Lietzke
Dispatch Business Reporter

A new speech-recognition product developed at AT&T's Bell Laboratories in Columbus is expected to accelerate the movement toward voice-activated telephone response systems.

Called FlexWord 5.0, the product recognizes voice requests, whether made in deep, southern drawls or a New England accent.

Unlike earlier versions, FlexWord 5.0 also enables business customers to create vocabularies of up to 2,000 words. AT&T technicians had to install the vocabulary for customers with the older version — a process that often took six weeks, said Mark Fohl, a technician who supports FlexWord sales.

"This has very broad application," Fohl said. "It is quite possible to take orders without talking to a person."



The voice-activated computer screen

FlexWord, a part of AT&T's Intuity Conversant interactive response system, is sold to companies that want to automate their communications systems to respond to voice commands, rather than phone buttons and extension numbers.

Businesses will use the system to help direct clients to the proper department by asking for sales, parts, customer assistance or other departments, Fohl said.

"It's supposed to make the caller front end a little more user-friendly," he said.

The latest version has just gone on sale, so sophisticated applications are not installed yet, but Fohl said it would be

possible for a mortgage company to use FlexWord to answer customer inquiries for various types of mortgage rates from an automated system.

"It lets us use much larger vocabularies than in the past," said Skip Tourville, an AT&T systems engineer. "When customers want to build a speech recognition category, they can build that vocabulary on their own and have it operating within a matter of days."

David Lutz, a technical developer, said the earlier speech recognition version was cumbersome. It required having people with differing speech patterns say each word thousands of times to embed it in computer memory in such a way that it could comprehend words and phrases by various speakers.

The new version uses the 40 phonemes, or language sounds, which are strung together to form words. This phoneme model makes it much easier to program words, Lutz said.

Although most of the work has been done in English, speech recognition is proceeding at AT&T with Mexican Spanish, Canadian French and continental French and German.