App aims to improve accessibility for visually impaired

Natasha Baker, Reuters

(Reuters) - Whether it is getting off a bus or reading a menu, a new app aims to make life easier for the blind or visually impaired.

Called Georgie, the app for Android devices enables people with little or no sight to accomplish daily activities that could be difficult for them.

"The great thing that attracted me to (creating the app) was this notion of gaining confidence, and also having reassurance that you could press a button and get help if you were lost," said Roger Wilson-Hinds, co-founder of Screenreader, a nonprofit based in Peterborough, England, that developed the app.

Users navigate the app's features by passing their fingers over various options which are read aloud. Lingering on a particular option produces a beep, indicating that the option has been selected.

The app can make calls or send texts but it also provides location-based technologies, which can let users know, for example, when the next bus is coming, which direction they're facing, or the ability to set location-based reminders.

"You can actually record a GPS-tagged voice label to say ‘dangerous steps' and as you're approaching it the phone will tell you that there are dangerous steps there," explained Alan Dean Kemp, the chief technology officer.

Kemp added that the app is not meant to replace a seeing-eye dog, but to provide added assistance.

About 39 million people worldwide are blind, according to the World Health Organization, and 285 million people are visually impaired.

For Wilson-Hinds, who is blind, one of his biggest struggles has been using public transit.

"I used to struggle to know when to get off the bus every evening when I was coming home from work," he said, adding that the app can give users information on upcoming bus stops while they're traveling.

It also reads out text, such as ingredients on a label, using a technology called optical character recognition (OCR).

Wilson-Hinds said what makes the app unique is the way it is designed for the less tech-savvy person and the support it provides.

"We've brought them all together into a little bundle so that you're not switching in and out of apps," he said.

Screenreader is also selling Georgie smartphones, Android-based Samsung phones that come pre-installed with the Georgie app.

"The settings are such that you turn on the phone and the app starts. You can't get out of it unless you go through a sort of unlock feature to do so," explained Kemp.

At 150 pounds ($230), the app is more expensive than most apps but Kemp said the price includes support for the app.

"You get a help line, which will set up your contacts for you if you want and even come and train you, so there's a big support mechanism around it," he said.

The app is available worldwide in English. All profits generated by the app go to a charity called Communication for Blind and Disabled People, of which Screenreader is a subsidiary.

(Editing by Patricia Reaney [1] and Todd Eastham [2])

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