

INTERSTENO KEYBOARDING COMPETITIONS

During the recent meeting in Milano, the Board of Intersteno has asked the Scientific Committee to evaluate and give strategical lines about the role and future of the Intersteno Keyboarding competitions, considering the pros and cons of the technical development (steno machines – speech recognition) and the software implementation to help competitors in reaching faster speed and accuracy.

The purpose of this document is to start discussing about the actual situation and ideas. It must be considered as A DRAFT for several reason:

- 1 – it express the personal opinions of the writer, even if many of these ideas are commonly shared by others 'Intersteno people' in Italy and abroad
- 2 – from linguistic accuracy. This document is directly produced in English and may be words and phrases must be re-worded for a better understanding of the means.
- 3 – other members of the Scientific Committee must be involved in adding considerations
- 4 – the Scientific Committee must release a final document as soon as possible, tentatively not later than June so that the opinion could help the Jury Coordinator to make final proposals at the Central Committee Meeting in Helsinki

Brief historical background

Intersteno has, among others, the proud to be the first and only Worldwide organisation which 50 years ago decided to organise world wide competition with the use of a keyboard , i.,e. typewriting. The first Congress after the 2nd world war, who saw a new birth of Intersteno, took place in Monaco-Montecarlo (1955) and in that Congress the first championship took place. Therefore next year in Wien we will be able to celebrate 50 years of continuous and unrivalled successes.

It is also to be noticed that in the same occasion, no championship in shorthand took place, notwithstanding Intersteno representatives were mainly involved in making known the big cultural and practical values of steno techniques. From this point of you I think we can agree that the decision to have such a kind of competition, was a very big strategical decision taken by Intersteno in that moment.

The rules regarding this competition were continuously updated in order to take pace with the technological improvements that were gradually incorporated in the basic mechanical machines, electric devices, correction features, up to electronic components (memory boards and displays) and then computer software.

At the beginning and for about 20 years the competitions were split in speed competition and accuracy competition, the first one with a maximum fault percentage of 1 per thousand and 10 minutes writing, the second with maximum 1 % of fault and lasting 30 minutes. The 1 % was gradually reduced up to the actual value of 0,25 %.

As far as the minimum speed of these competitions, since it was believed that 240 strokes per minutes was the average need for working on a keyboard, it was decided to start from 300/360 strokes per minutes in order to give value to persons who were really putting efforts to reach excellence levels in this ability.

The goals of keyboarding competitions

The main goals of the keyboarding competitions were interpreted in several ways during this long life and several of them have up to now be attained and are become the 'pillars' or 'certainties' of our know-how in this field.

1 – to prove that it was possible to write with high speed using keyboarding thus evaluating the high skills of the champions

2 – to prove that teaching methods were and are important in attaining a good success. Even if there was no continuous monitoring on how the competitors were writing, it can easily be said that copying a text from a paper in order to attain high speed and accuracy, needed and needs the use of the so called 'touch system' with all fingers involved in the writing process.

3 – to try to define which kind of writing instrument could best suit in achieving high results. This was mainly referred to the various kind and makes of typewriting machines, in the moment were the this kind of industry was going on international marketing (Olivetti – Triumph and later on IBM) improving their products in several ways.

In this updating process we have to mention that (as far as it is know to the writer of this document) practically all competitors in these 50 years have used standard keyboards (i.e. keyboard with standard arrangements of keys). No competitors has used Dvorak keyboard (mainly used in the USA) and only two competitors had used in Amsterdam a keyboard with special arrangement of keys for the Italian language, conceived by Prof. Teodosio Galotta of Potenza (Italy).

In the latest decade these goals have been largely influenced by the word processing software (of various makes and levels) which proved to be an high contribution in helping competitors to reach better accuracy and speed.

The strategical view about keyboarding competitions

During the last years many question arose about the 'strategic roles' of keyboarding competitions like:

1 – are they still valid in view of the new technologies (i.e. scanners for reproducing texts, speech recognition etc)?

2 – is it fair to evaluate in the same list competitors using 'abbreviation' in comparison to those not using any help of this kind?

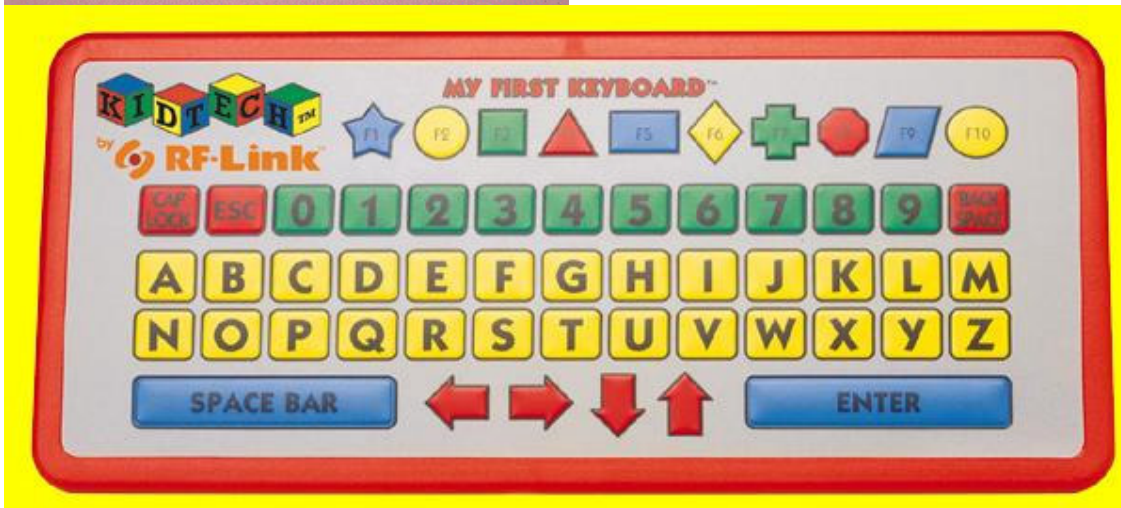
3 – it is fair to have in the same list competitors using different techniques, like steno machines and speech recognition?

One question above all has to be put in the discussion: keyboarding is no more considered (mainly in most European countries) to be a professional tool, since software producers has been able to prove (even if with political and not technical reasons) that a positive impact on the productivity of preparing texts is given by the use of word processing software rather than a rational use of keyboarding. This has lead to the situation in which in many professional and not professional schools, keyboarding is taught for a short time only and in many case has been practically cancelled. It is also to be considered that this kind of teaching has frequently been incorporated in the so called 'basic informatic learning' and the new teachers in this discipline are in many occasion not aware of how to teach keyboarding ability.

On the other hand we have to consider that the increased use of computers also in the primary schools , brings young people in contact with the need of using keyboarding.

This leads to a lot of discussions about why, when and what to do in introducing very young students in approaching the use of keyboard.

In some occasion it is also envisaged the transformation of traditional keyboard in 'alfabetic keyboard' were the keys are arranged alfabetically. ¹



Even if these 'experiments' can be considered play-tools or tricks, one cannot deny that no special investigation has been made in order to improve the keyboard layout. I do not want to enter on this specific aspect which may come to a lot of discussions and I have mentioned it just to remember different ways of thinking.

How can we to-day define a keyboarding competition?

¹ As a personal experience I can recall that SMAU (the second European trade show of computers and informatics) decided about 10 years ago to install information points based on computers, from which a visitor could get information about products, firms etc. Obviously it was necessary to use a keyboard to get this info. A research made on about 1000 persons resembling the average visitors of SMAU, proved that the 'alphabetical' position of keys lead to quicker use in getting the info and was largely appreciated. One has to consider that the majority of the visitors of this exhibition were still selling typewriters and were therefore accustomed about the keyboard layout!

The basic 'pillars' of the Intersteno keyboarding competition are 3:

- 1 – the high level of accuracy
- 2 – the high level of speed
- 3 – the length of the competition (20/30 minutes).

The combination of these 3 pillars is the base for the so called 'productivity' in using a keyboard, whether this productivity is for personal or professional needs. Productivity is any case related and influenced by other factors which refers to the use of keyboarding in the specific activity and related goals. We do not measure the ability to write texts, which involves linguistic and mental attitudes that cannot be measured and compared (at least in an easy and meaningful way).

In this competition everybody can take place provided the minimum defined standard as above are met, irrespective of the method they use in typing on a keyboard.

We can therefore state that **this kind of competition is the basic and commonly accepted way of measuring and certifying an ability to produce a quantity of text in a certain time, with a high accuracy. We can add also that the text produced (thanks to the high accuracy) can be practically used in normal daylife without further corrections. Last, but not least, this work comes out from reading and reproducing a text this means understanding and exactly reproducing what has been written,** not listening to a dictation as it was made in the very first competitions at the beginning of 1900, or transcribing a text from a recording as we could organize to day.²

Following this definition we can see, if we examine the past, that no factor is involved in how the various kinds of machines, makes and devices has influenced the results, nor do we want to define which is the best way of approaching, teaching and learning how to write. If a competitor has reached a results in 3 days or in 3 years, this does not influence his/her result in the competition.

Following the development in the modern way of producing and delivering texts, we have eliminated (only few years ago) the final result of printing the text which is, in many case, the goals of a work. (think for example to a document to be released to a Court – Public Office etc.). We have therefore reduced one additional variable of this formula: in fact we could imagine that for example releasing a text with a typewriter can be considered in this case more productive than delivering it with a computer, provided the ability of the two workers are the same.

How we face and pace with the progress?

Intersteno history in the competition field, has proved (in my humble opinion) that the approaches made to differentiate instruments, way of working etc. has not been successful in the image of our competitions. Moreover the impact of the technology in helping reaching higher quality and higher speed in producing texts leads to very similar processes not only in the keyboarding competition, but also in traditional shorthand domain.

The developments are easily accepted by young peoples, like the one that take part in the Intersteno competition and that Intersteno encourages to upgrade their abilities. A young participants normally can use the latest equipments, not because he/she evaluates are the best, but simply because they are available in the market.

² Just as an historical remark, I remember that Flaviano Rodriguez in the years '70 organised in Florence championships in which transcription from a tape was also forseen.

What we could consider to be today a big problem to face, tomorrow (in the true sense of the word) is no more a problem but becomes a reality. In Rome we all have noticed the great quantity of portable computers, as well as of portable phones used by competitors.

Are we willing to forbid participation to a competitor who is able to write at least 360 strokes using the reduced keyboard of a portable phone? Are we willing to forbid participation to competitors using the latest word processing software and related 'shortcut'?

I think that we can face and pace progress only having a general view in which we stick to the 3 basic pillars of evaluating the results of a work, independently from the technical means which is used.

This of course does not mean that we must accept a 'chaos' in organisation, evaluation rules and motivation of competitors.

Organisation: each new technology must be announced by the competitor and get approval or subject to specific conditions of use (for example speech recognition needs the use of a stenomask or silencer).

Evaluation: the technology must be feasible with the way in which the competitor's work is evaluated.

Motivation: one must be careful not to create 'quarrels' about the final result, thus over-evaluating or under-evaluating the results of a competitor. This needs a clarification (that is not only pertaining to this kind of competition but to the overall systems of Intersteno competitions) that only the one and best result can be considered pertaining to a 'worldwide champion'. In order to facilitate this my proposal is not to split the keyboarding competition in several lists (except the ones for age differences) but rather add a column in which the technology used (keyboarding – speech recognition – etc) is stated.

Since this proposal reduces the number of persons who gets 'first – second and third place' a larger number of prizes can be assigned to other qualifications eventually even considering the technology used.

Some remarks about speech recognition

On this subject we could have a deeper investigation, but in any case we have strategically to consider that this kind of technology will have a larger space in the very near future.

Microsoft is already considering implementation in their software not only for producing commands for helping people with disabilities, but mainly for texts production.

In fact, the main use of speech recognition in text production is 999 out of 1000 users all over the world. Even if the important improvements in this technology (thanks to computer's speed and wider Ram memory) have brought it to practical use in reporting field (as it was practically shown in Rome), the core application remains that of texts production, the same definition that we could use for a better image of our competition.

Today one can easily estimate at least 3 million of persons in the world using this technology as a replacement or integration of keyboarding. The efforts made by the main producers of this technology (IBM and Dragon – now Scansoft who is marketing both products) has been and still is

in the sense of a compatibility with any word processing software, of which nearly all features can be produced by voice. For example search and replace a word, adjust margins, fonts, opening and closing files etc. From this point of view no remarkable difference can be seen in respect to keyboarding. Other aspects can be discussed and evaluated but I do not think this is useful in this document.

If somebody fears that everybody can now beat the record of Helena, I express my opinion in so far that Helena has worked a lot on the goal of improving speed and accuracy and keeping the first place in the competition: the same has to be done by somebody else using keyboarding or an alternative technology. The improvements used by Helena (whether they are specific or coming out from procedures already included in word-processing software as Jaroslav has said recently) are a results of her capacity to understand and use helps coming from the technology. The same applies to speech recognition. The human value is still important also with this technology, and I can tell it on sound basis since I have practical experience in teaching (with Maria Luisa Corti Crippa) this technology to young and not young persons. A professional and efficient use of speech recognition needs attention and training nearly in the same way as it is needed to use professional and efficient keyboarding.

I am personally using speech recognition, because I think that nobody can teach what he has not practically used (at least in our topics) but I still use keyboarding, like writing this document.

As a conclusion of this point, as we are saying we must confront this technology with the others we are using i.e. we must be able to reach the same good results (the 3 pillars of our keyboarding competition) using the new technology. If somebody is able to do so, we will welcome him in Intersteno since this means that Intersteno has not loosen good opportunity to keep in pace with progress.

I would only like to recall the document prepared by NRCA, that I spread to you some weeks ago, which has the same strategic view, after a negative decision toward admitting speech writers in their Association.

Milano, 15th March 2004.

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About when and what

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