Hadley Presents

Blindshell Classic

Presented by Ricky Enger

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Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts.

In this episode we explore the BlindShell Classic, a smartphone alternative for those who are blind or low vision and joining me is Hadley learning expert. Steve Kelley, welcome to the show, Steve.

Steven Kelley: Hey Ricky, how are you?

Ricky Enger: I am great. I'm so glad that you could join me to talk about the BlindShell. This is a really cool device and looking forward to diving into all of the things that it can and can't do. Before we do that, though, for those who aren't familiar with you yet from Get Up and Go and various other discussion groups and even a podcast that you've done on Hadley Presents, tell us a bit about who you are and what you do.

Steven Kelley: Well, Ricky, I'm a learning expert at Hadley and have been doing that for about a year. And prior to that I was a vision rehab therapist working with clients out in the field for a local agency.

Ricky Enger: And in addition to what you do for Hadley, you actually sometimes get lucky enough to receive devices that you can review. So for example, in Access World you have a couple of articles taking a look at some devices and one of those just happens to be the BlindShell.

Steven Kelley: Yeah, I was very fortunate to get a demo of the BlindShell and really had a lot of fun with that.

Ricky Enger: So let's talk about what it is. In the intro, we call this a smartphone alternative, but you know, that could mean just about anything. What are we talking about when we say a smartphone alternative? What is the BlindShell?

Steven Kelley: Well, you know, that's not a bad description. I would also say it's like a hybrid. If people remember what the candy bar phones looked like, half of the phone was the number pad and the other half of the phone was a display. And it was probably about the same size as say one of the older iPhones. I don't know, maybe about a quarter of an inch thick, so it's not real heavy, but I would call it a hybrid because it's got the dialing pad still on it. And not only that, but there's plenty of space between the buttons and they're labeled in white on black and in large print. So for those of us with low vision, it makes it pretty easy to see.

Ricky Enger: And the button spacing is one thing that often does come up. For many, just having a touchscreen is not the thing, either because of neuropathy or it just feels like an awkward user interface. We like to have that tactile feedback. We like to be able to touch the one and know that it's a one because it feels familiar like a keypad. So having buttons facing where you can determine where you are on the phone, what button you're touching, and not try and press one button and instead press three at once because they're so close together. So that's excellent as well as having this nice high contrast interface so that it's very easy to tell what you're touching.

Steven Kelley: You know, it may sound like a minor thing, and particularly to somebody who's younger, but I can just tell you from working with clients who grew up using a phone that had buttons that you could feel it's really, it's a big deal. I mean, people are still looking for that and frankly I don't think it's just older folks who are looking for that. I think a lot of people just do better with a button that they can feel and a keypad where they can position their fingers and know where the numbers are.

Ricky Enger: Exactly. So, this is a phone that can work well for those who are totally blind and those who are low vision. And that would seem to indicate that there are features for both. So I'm assuming that the phone does talk.

Steven Kelley: You know, that was one of the very first things I noticed was that literally out of the box, as soon as you press the power button, which is also the back button, it begins talking to you and to me right there, I mean that, everything about that was accessible. I just thought from that moment forward the phone starts with text to speech, bravo. Whether you're going to use the phone visually or not, it just told me that right out of the box it's accessible and you don't always find that. That was just great.

Ricky Enger: That's true. Oftentimes when you get a phone that is a smartphone or something else that's off the shelf, you're looking at starting the accessibility features by pressing a button or saying something, dictating it and you're able to launch that, but this happens right away. So not only does it talk, but I'm assuming that there are some text features as well that make it usable for someone with low vision. What's available for making the display look comfortable?

Steven Kelley: Yeah, there are quite a few options. If I remember correctly, we have two text options, one of which I really didn't like the name of. It's huge text. It's about the size of a newspaper headline. So what happens is you get a few letters on the app that's describing it. For example, contacts. When you have it set as huge, you're not going to see contacts all on one line. It's going to break and wrap to the second line. But the great thing is, it's nice and large and it is in high contrast on the phone and you've got a couple of color options too. So for me, I just immediately chose white letters on a black background, which was nice and easy to see. But you've probably got more options on this than you would find on any other flip phone in terms of changing background and foreground color and the two text sizes, while there's not a whole lot of variation, both are large and the larger text size is pretty good.

Ricky Enger: And so we've talked about this not being a smartphone and that there are smartphones and this isn't one of them, but we haven't really talked about what differentiates a smartphone from, I guess you would call it a feature phone. If you don't know that terminology, you might think, well, something that isn't a smartphone, all I'm going to be able to do with it is maybe call someone or call emergency services if I needed to, and beyond that, there's really not much else there. But I think that's not an accurate description, right? What can you do with this phone, even though it isn't a smartphone?

Steven Kelley: What it does have is it has apps that have been developed for BlindShell specifically. And the cool thing is really I do think that there's somebody really thinking about usability at BlindShell. As you go through some of these tools, like object tagging, object tagging is just something where you can put a code, there's a sticker of the size of a postage stamp that you can put on something and then you can identify it by recording a label on that. So each time the phone sees the code on, I don't know, say your CDs or maybe something in the freezer, it will read that label back to you. And it's just a really useful tool and it's built right in.

Ricky Enger: And that's something that you're not going to find on a smartphone without downloading the app and perhaps buying the tags to do that. So it is nice that this kind of thing exists on a phone developed specifically for those who are blind or low vision. What about some of the more basic things? Can you text with it? Can you check your email? What kinds of things can you do and are there things that you might have expected to be there that weren't?

Steven Kelley: Let me address the first couple of things. Yeah, you can do pretty much all of the basic things that you might want to do. You can certainly text or message. You've got an app for contacts. You also have an app for emails, which I think is great. One of the really nice features is the dictation on this phone. So for example, if you were doing texting or an email, you could simply press and hold the volume up or volume down buttons. If you do a long press on those, it begins the dictation. Dictation is quite good. There's a notes app as well, so you could use the dictation on the notes app and there was actually, on the main menu, a manual and you could click on the manual and there's the whole user guide is right there in text to speech. And I just thought, wow, that is beautiful. I just love that, so it's like you can right away go in and research all of the stuff that you might want to know about the phone and you don't have to hunt it down on a website.

Ricky Enger: Back to dictation for a moment. Did you find that you used dictation more often as you were playing with this phone and getting familiar with it?

Steven Kelley: Well, I was never particularly good at the old-style texting, so if it was something short, like five or six letters, I would just go ahead and text it in. But if it was anything longer, then I would use the dictation. Good dictation is something that is of interest to me to begin with. So, as soon as I realized that it looked pretty good, I went right to the notes app and was able to dictate several sentences nice and clear and 100% accurate. I'm sure that I could have dictated something that wasn't 100% accurate because that's just the nature of these things. But it was excellent, and it was pretty easy.

Ricky Enger: Let's talk about pricing then because that's always a biggie. Sometimes you find a piece of technology that would really, really benefit you as a blind person or as someone with low vision and then you discover $6,000, what? What are we looking at? And this will be US-centric pricing, although BlindShell is available outside the US as well. But we'll concentrate just for the sake of this discussion on US pricing. What's that like?

Steven Kelley: I think if you buy it from LS&S or AT Guys, it's $349 and, from what I understand, if you buy it from BlindShell is $399. You're looking at mid $300 for the phone. ~~So it's less than a lot of quality smartphones, but more than some of the smart phones that you really shouldn't buy in the first place.~~

Ricky Enger: ~~And that's a great point because you could walk into your AT&T store, and by the way,~~ this is exclusively AT&T for the moment, right?

Steven Kelley: Yeah, it's the GSM network. So it'd be T-Mobile, AT&T, anybody else who's got the GSM.

Ricky Enger: So, you could walk into one of those stores and say, "I'm signing up for a plan." And they go, "Hey, here's this free Android phone." There isn't anything wrong with Android and everybody likes free, but the thing to keep in mind is that many manufacturers will take what Google has done with Android and they will change that significantly. And so what can happen is that the accessibility features that Android does have don't make it onto those lower end slash free phones that you get with your plan. There are even some flip phones that exist, but they certainly don't talk, and they have few, if any, low vision features. So free is not always good in this case, I think.

Steven Kelley: There was one client in particular, although there had been several clients over the years, but she was this classic case of going into one of the GSM stores and looking for an accessible phone because she had recently lost her vision and so they handed her the low end Android phone. Don't get me wrong, I'd fight for my Samsung Android phone because I really love it. But one of the things that I discovered working with this client was that the TalkBack just didn't work on the phone. It was broken. I actually went and checked with another store, the same model, just to make sure that it wasn't me and the training process was broken, but in fact the TalkBack just did not work. So we really struggled with that and the client just was not able to do something as simple as dialing the phone without using the Google assistant. That was the only way she was able to do it. So in a lot of ways, when I see a phone like this, which is pretty rock solid in terms of the accessibility~~, at least the time that I used it,~~ ~~I put on my VRT hat and I realize, now this is something that I'm going to be able to teach, that~~ a person's going to be able to use and it's going to work.

Ricky Enger: It's got to be a challenge for people who are either looking for a new phone themselves or people who are the experts in the field and they're being asked, "What phone should I use? Should I get a smart phone? Should I get one of these things like the BlindShell?" Why might someone gravitate toward something like the BlindShell as opposed to an iPhone or an Android phone? Because they both are accessible, but it's a very different user experience.

Steven Kelley: You're so right. And I think you bring up a really good point. ~~Whenever you're doing an assessment with somebody, I think one of the most important things to do is really kind of listen, what are their goals, what do they want to do? And~~ a lot of times people want something that they can just make a phone call while they're out walking. ~~I heard that an awful lot.~~ So in a situation like that, a flip phone that is accessible is perfect and it doesn't need all the features of the BlindShell. But then you have people that want to be able to do something like, "Well, I'd like to check my email and I'd like to do some texting on it." And you I just discovered, for example, that BlindShell had added a YouTube app, which seems to work really, really well. So, when you start hearing that people want some of those other features, that's when you start considering, okay, so maybe the BlindShell would work for them or maybe they should go onto a smartphone.

Ricky Enger: Are there features that immediately come to mind that you don't see on the BlindShell that you would need an actual smartphone to access?

Steven Kelley: The one that comes to my mind right away is either BARD or Bookshare or both of those. There's currently a book reader and a media app that's available, so you could connect the phone to your computer using USB and you could just download a book or an audio book or just a text book, put it on the phone and use the book reader to read it. But those are two that I would love to see. And it really doesn't have a web browser per se. Although adding YouTube and internet radio really, that covers a lot of stuff for people.

Ricky Enger: It absolutely does. The one thing that you probably don't see without a web browser or a specialized app, you're not going to see social media, right? So no Twitter, no Facebook. If you're hoping to keep up with your children or your grandchildren on social media, this is not what you're going to use to do that, right? So you would go to a PC or perhaps a smartphone.

Steven Kelley: Yeah, absolutely. And I think for some people those are going to be deal breakers because they do want Facebook or Twitter. ~~But, let's be honest, how accessible sometimes do you find Facebook and Twitter on a smartphone?~~

~~Ricky Enger: It can be a frustrating experience, depending on your level of tech expertise and depending on which program you use to access those things.~~

~~Steven Kelley: Yeah, I think for a lot of new users there's a great deal of interest, but I also think sometimes the reality of trying to use those apps, it can be pretty daunting.~~

Ricky Enger: And I think one thing to keep in mind is that you can have different needs that don't all get met by the same device. So for example, you may wish to browse the web, you may wish to do some online shopping, and those are things that you might find better suited to a computer. Whereas taking the BlindShell with you, you know that you're able to text, you know that you're able to call someone and you could check your email in a pinch and that's really all you care about a phone for. And so it does nicely fit into that niche, I think.

Steven Kelley: Yeah, it does and you just reminded me, too, of one of the apps that's on the phone that's kind of interesting. ~~It's called Localization and what's really cool about it is, one of the apps that I also thought might be missing on this phone would be full blown GPS like you would have with a smartphone.~~ Localization is a GPS app on the BlindShell where when you're outside, it really does not work well inside at all, but when you're outside and you're able to connect to a satellite, you press the button and it will tell you what address is closest to you. And it was pretty accurate. And I thought, you know, for the casual walker, somebody who may not be up to using a GPS on the smartphone, what an ingenious app. I mean, sometimes that's all you need. If you've gotten yourself turned around, right, is to find out this is the address, you know, now I've got an idea of where I'm at.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. So it's not full-fledged GPS, but it really doesn't need to be.

Steven Kelley: For a lot of people, I don't think it does. But you know, again, if somebody really wants directions street, the street turn by turn walking directions, then this is not going to work for them.

Ricky Enger: As we kind of come to the end here, let's say that someone is interested in getting a BlindShell phone and that's available directly from BlindShell as well as places like AT Guys and LS&S, that's only a part of the puzzle, right? So you would still need to have a phone plan that's not in purchasing the device itself, right?

Steven Kelley: Yeah, that's correct. I mean, you would need to take, for example, I took my demo to, I use T-Mobile for mine, so I took it into them. They got me a SIM card, they added it to my plan and you pay the monthly plan and I think with this too, you're going to need a little bit of data and which I had on my second plan. So those are things that you will definitely need.

Ricky Enger: And that is a question that we may not be able to answer ourselves but may come up. So it's a question that those of you who are listening might want to ask back in say the nineties or so we had a smartphone plan which you had to have data for and then there was a feature phone plan where you had a tiny bit of data but it was treated as kind of a different tier. And so it may be that you're not going to be using a ton of data with this feature phone. And so when you go in, ask your provider about what data plans are available and if this phone is considered a feature phone, can you perhaps pay less per month to get access to talk and messaging. And you know, in the 90s it was 300 megs of data or something like that. And it's probably changed since then. But just see if there are tiers that you don't have to pay for unlimited data that you'll never use.

Steven Kelley: I think you have to be honest with yourself too. I mean, since the phone will connect at 4G, you've got pretty good connectivity with both YouTube, internet, radio, the things where you're going to have some streaming services, right? So if you're really into streaming services and you're not going to be near WiFi, you're going to be out and about a lot of times, you are going to be using a fair amount of data. On the flip side, it connects nicely to WiFi, it's pretty easy. So if you're going to be doing that streaming stuff at home or at school or work where there is a WiFi, then that'll take care of that data usage for you.

Ricky Enger: So, for those who wish to, they can check out the show notes and read your Access article, which goes into greater detail about what's available in the menus and overall description of the phone. And it also covers some of the things that we've touched on here. Do you have any final thoughts, Steve, that we didn't touch on that you feel like we should mention before wrapping up?

Steven Kelley: I was just really impressed with, again, the overall accessibility and sometimes we've had this conversation before too about accessibility. Accessibility can be different than usability. You can have something that's very accessible but really is not usable, meaning it's just clumsy. And so you find both with this phone, which is really something I like and, as I mentioned before, it does seem like a pretty solid phone. The menus were all working, it wasn't quirky and even YouTube, which clearly is going out to the internet and coming back again, worked really, really well on this. And I think it's going to be easy for a relatively new user for some of these features.

Ricky Enger: Thank you so much for spending a little time, Steve, and telling us about this really cool device.

Steven Kelley: Oh, it's been a great pleasure. Thanks, Ricky. I enjoyed talking with you today.

Ricky Enger: Thanks for listening.

Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.