Hadley Presents

12 Favorite Tech Apps and Gadgets

Presented by Ricky Enger

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, Hadley staff join us to share their favorite impactful and accessible technology. Welcome to the show everybody.

Jennifer Ottowitz: Hey.

Tiffany Mpofu: Hey.

Douglas Walker: It's good to be here.

Steven Kelley: Hey everyone.

Ricky Enger: Wow. This is amazing. I can honestly not think of anything better than spending time with a few of my favorite people and discussing one of my big passions, which is technology. Before we kick things off and get into everybody's favorite picks, we'll do just quick intros for each of you. So first we've got Douglas Walker, who is our director of research and development, and he might sound familiar to anyone who has checked out our Apple workshops. Welcome to the show, Douglas.

Douglas Walker: Thanks. This is going to be a lot of fun.

Ricky Enger: Great. Next up we have Jennifer Ottowitz who is a learning expert in the adjustment, independent living, and recreation team. And you'll also be familiar with her from a few Hadley Presents, whatever the plural of that is, and also from the Resource Roundtable discussion group. Welcome, Jennifer.

Jennifer Ottowitz: Hi, happy to be here.

Ricky Enger: Great to have you. And next up then is Tiffany Mpofu, who is a learning expert in assistive technology. Has joined our team fairly recently. She used to be on the adjustment, independent living, and recreation with Jennifer, and now we are happy to have snagged her for ourselves on the assistive technology team. You'll also know her from Get Up and Go! and Travel Talk discussion groups. Welcome, Tiffany.

Tiffany Mpofu: Hello. Hello. I'm excited to be here.

Ricky Enger: Great. So good to have you. And finally, Steve Kelley. You've been on a Hadley Presents or two. Also learning expert in assistive technology. And people may have heard you on Get Up and Go! with Tiffany and our new Book Nook discussion group. Welcome, Steve.

Steven Kelley: Hey everyone. Delighted to be here.

Ricky Enger: All right. With those introductions out of the way, we get to move on to the fun bit of the program, which is to talk tech. It is so, so amazing to have you all here. We thought about doing this because we all have a lot in common, but we each approach things differently as well. Some of us love technology for its own sake. We love playing with all of those gadgets and gizmos and jumping right into the software and hardware. And some of us use technology because it's a necessary thing and it finds a place in our lives. Even though we may not be in love with the concept of technology, the things that it can do for us, that's where technology really shines.

So, I thought it would be really nice to get everyone's perspective on how they use technology and what kinds of things each of us chooses to pick up on a daily basis, the things that we adore and can't live without. I happen to know what each person has chosen for their favorite technology, but no one else on the panel here knows what each of the others has chosen, so it'll be a fun reveal here. First, I think let's start with Tiffany. What did you choose for your can't live without technology? What did you choose and why did you choose it? How do you use this technology?

Tiffany Mpofu: Now, Ricky, this is the hard part that I had with doing this, because choosing just one favorite technology was so hard to do. I will say that my smartphone is one of my favorites, and it's my favorite because I can do so many things with it, I don't have to carry around so many other devices. I have an iPhone 8 Plus. In the Apple world, it is ancient, but it works, and it does what I need it to do.

And with my phone, other than making phone calls and text messages, there's a few things that I enjoy doing on it, and one of them is doing online banking. Just being able to do that on the go is really nice. Also, I use the camera, and not just to take pictures of scenery or selfies, but I use it for a mirror. Sometimes when you're out at a public restroom, inside the mirror is mounted up on the wall. Then there's maybe a sink in front of you. It's hard to get up close, so I'll use the camera on my phone as a mirror to make sure my lunch isn't showing in my teeth.

My other go-to app is Visor. Visor is a magnifier app. And this app is my lifesaver. It turns my phone into a digital magnifier so I can contrast the colors, adjust the magnification of course, and it also has a light function on it. If I need to read printed material on the go, or maybe I'm at a family member's house and I need to heat up something in the microwave and their microwave doesn't look like mine and it's not set up like how mine is, I can use my magnifier or Visor to adjust the settings. My phone is one of my favorites, but I do have a few others.

Next up is my iPad. I have an iPad Air, fourth generation. It has a 10.9” screen, so of course the screen is bigger and I'm able to do different things on my iPad. I use the Zoom feature on it and also on my phone too. I use Siri, Zoom, and VoiceOver, so it kind of depends on what I'm doing on my phone. But on my iPad, I mostly use Zoom and I mostly use it for entertainment purposes. So, like, if I'm just kicking back, I'll be on social media or streaming Netflix and Hulu or playing a game or something. That's what I mostly do on my iPad. And I also do internet searches.

But if I want to be more productive and really focusing in on what I'm doing, if I'm doing more extended tasks, like extended reading and writing activities, I like to use my desktop computer. I have a 32-inch monitor so I can split the screen. I also use my video magnifier too. When you are mentioning Ricky about the discussion groups, sometimes we have learners who may make suggestions or provide resources or some helpful information that I can quickly jot down using my video magnifier and then be able to provide those in the resources. That's my technology. That's my favorite.

Ricky Enger: What I so love about this is that you have all of these different devices, and they all serve a different purpose. The larger screen for the iPad is great for entertainment, or for if you're doing a little bit of reading and you're using that larger screen, and same of course for your computer. And then the phone, being able to use it as a magnifier is super cool, because like you said, you don't have to carry around multiple devices. You can do a lot of things with this one single device and different apps. Very, very cool. I love it. I'm not sure why I think this, but something tells me that Doug Walker may have some similar things on his list, being a self-professed Apple fan boy.

Douglas Walker: Self-professed. Yeah. I think everybody points at that. It's probably no surprise to anybody that my devices today are Apple devices. The first one that I want to talk about is fairly new to Apple, and this is the Apple AirTags. If you don't know what an AirTag is, it's Apple's device that's made for finding lost stuff or missing items. It's about the size of a quarter. It's really small, but Apple and lots of other people sell all these different accessories that you can buy to put your AirTag on or in. I put one in my wallet. It clips in there and I can slide it in my wallet. Also, I have a key chain that I can put one in. But they're kind of pricey. I mean, you can get one for, I think $29, but I went ahead and splurged for the four pack. Still not enough. I need more of them.

So, I have one in my wallet, one on my keys. I keep one in my backpack and then I have one on my white cane, because I'm always putting my cane in a corner somewhere, propping it up and it's like, which corner is that? It's really cool because you can use your Find My app, then if you start missing one of these devices, to find it, you can actually say, "Hey," or you can use Siri. So, you can do the whole Siri thing and say, "Hey, find my keys." And then it starts chirping or playing a sound so you can locate it. A lot of times I don't have to go beyond that, but if you open your Find My app and you find that item, you can get it to play a sound from there.

Or if you still can't hear it, there's a find button there that you can tap. It'll pop up on the screen and visually, it points an arrow in the direction that your item is and says, it's like 15 feet away, 10 feet away as you get closer to it. Or, if you happen to have VoiceOver running, it actually speaks that it's to the left or to the right, and it's 10 feet away. Now it's eight feet away. And then when you get close enough to it, you can have it play the sound and pinpoint it right there.

Yeah. We have three workshops there. One that shows you how to set it up. No worries. It's super simple to set up. And then one that shows how to find items nearby. And then one that shows how to find items further away that you can actually get walking or driving directions to find it there. So, it's a pretty cool device.

My other thing, Tiffany kind of hit on this already. And it was so hard, Tiffany, for me too, because I'm like, everything on my iPhone is my favorite thing. But I have one thing that I've actually probably used a half a dozen times already today, and that's the built-in magnifier that's on the iPhone, and it's also on the iPad, and on the iPod Touch as well. And it uses your device’s back-facing, or as of late, your front-facing camera too, to enlarge image images that are on your screen, just like a magnifier would. The magnifier has actually been around for a while. I've been around with it, so I've been able to constantly see it improve over the years, and it's really gotten better and better. And iOS 15 just came out and had a lot of improvements. One interesting thing with iOS 15 is that it's no longer in the accessibility area of the phone. Apple has actually placed it right there on your home screen as an app. It's crept outside of accessibility and become a mainstream app on your home screen then.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. You can open it right from there instead of, okay, I got to go to settings, and then I got to go here and then I got to go there.

Douglas Walker: Now you can still set the accessibility shortcut, the triple click to the side button if you'd like, to pull it up, which is what I do. And I use it from everything. This morning I checked the thermostat and it's gotten chilly here, so I turned the heat on. I use it for things like checking menus and price tags and signing receipts.

And again, Tiffany mentioned this with her app that she uses. It has a flashlight and all kinds of cool color filters in it. One thing that I don't use much, it has people detection in mine, because I have the LIDAR sensor in it, and I guess that would be good for social distancing and stuff.

With iOS 15, if you have VoiceOver running now, and you point it at something in the view area and you touch that view area, it's going to do artificial intelligence and start trying to recognize that object and tell you what the objects are. It's doing a better and better job with recognizing the text that's there. But if it won't read all the text, I found that if I share it or save it to my camera roll, like Tiffany's talking about, that it'll pretty much read all the text right there. So, I'm using my magnifier tons and tons. So yes, Apple products for me today, AirTags and the magnifier app.

Ricky Enger: Not a surprise to anyone, but I love hearing how both of you use the same devices for similar things and for different things. It really speaks to the versatility of some of these smartphones. And if you're listening and you have an Android instead of an iPhone, fear not. A lot of these features are also in Android phones. Next up, Jennifer, share with us your words of wisdom on your favorite tech.

Jennifer Ottowitz: Okay. Well, first of all, I have to say that I'm more of an average technology user and an as-needed user. I like technology, I value all that it can do, but I honestly get kind of intimidated by it. Once I get over that initial anxiety, I find that I'm using it more and more in my everyday life, even if it's just to get started with things, because I do like to be off the grid, but it can be really helpful to get started. And so, my first pick is a good example of that, and that's a money reader. And there are different options for this. I want to talk about the iBill. Here in the U.S., our paper money does not have any tactually distinct characteristics. It's all the same size, same shape, nothing super special that makes any one type of bill stand out.

So, these money readers, and the iBill in particular, you just slide the end of your paper money into it, hit a button, and it'll tell you what it is. It'll say if it's $1 bill, $5 bill. It has a AAA battery and it's just a separate unit. It's not a part of a smartphone, so it's really portable and nice to use if you don't have your smartphone with you. You can even get it to announce what the denomination is in a pattern of sounds or a pattern of vibrations, if you want some privacy, it's a really noisy area too.

It's available commercially, you can buy it, but if you're a U.S. citizen or a legal resident of the U.S. or a U.S. citizen living abroad, you can actually get a free iBill through a program offered by the U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing. And we're actually going to have a link to the application for this in the show notes for this podcast, right Ricky?

Ricky Enger: Yeah, absolutely. And if you don't have one, even if you do have a smartphone, I still carry mine because for me, it's quicker and easier honestly than unlocking the smartphone and making sure that there's enough light and all of that's stuff. What a great tool.

Jennifer Ottowitz: And if you are already using the Talking Book Service, you're automatically eligible to get one. You still need to fill out the application, but you just mark that on and you're good to go. Otherwise, you can get a doctor or a vision rehabilitation professional to sign off that you're legally blind or visually impaired, and they'll send it off to you. Just a note though, because I know Doug did a wonderful workshop for Hadley on the Seeing AI app, and that does have a money reading feature also built into it. And I use an app called the LookTel money reader and there may be some other apps out there too, but it's really great option for technology.

My second choice, I think is revolutionary. It really is, in terms of managing health, and that's a continuous glucose monitor. And my husband actually uses it, but there is a part that I use too that I'll talk about in just a sec. This technology will let somebody know their blood sugar levels throughout the day and night, without having to stick their finger, to get a drop of blood that they put on a strip, and then they get those results. And it is truly liberating. For anybody who uses insulin to treat your diabetes, insurance will cover the cost of it. There are a couple different companies that offer products. But how it works, it has a sensor, that's a little wire that inserts under your skin, and that's held in place with an adhesive patch. That connects to a transmitter that's going to rest on the surface of your skin and it's about maybe an inch and a half by half an inch and about a quarter inch high.

So that's how high it would stick up. And you can put this sensor transmitter kind of combo, insert the sensor itself maybe in the back of your arm or in your abdomen, and then you're going to change that sensor and where it's located about every 10 to 14 days, depending on which brand of CGM you're using. Then that transmitter sends a signal to a receiver, which is a separate unit, or to your smartphone.

And the apps used for whichever company's product you're using are accessible with VoiceOver, which is really cool. So, I can actually go on my husband's phone and check his readings. But even better, they make companion apps. So, I have an app on my phone where he shared his data with me, and I can check his blood sugar levels. And you not only get the blood sugar reading, you get trend information, are you steady? Are you slowly rising, slowly falling, rapidly rising, or falling? And you can set alerts to let you know if your blood sugar's too low or at a certain low point, a certain high point. And I'll get those alarms on my phone too if his blood sugars at a certain low point so I can help support him in whatever he needs.

It's so great because it really helps people make more informed decisions about how they're treating their condition. What's cool is with the one he has, he can even say, "Hey Siri, what's my blood sugar?" And she'll say, "Your blood sugar is..." And let him know. It really is a game changer. Just one real quick disclaimer, we really encourage you... We're going to share some links to learn more about the two different companies. Check with your doctor to make sure that this is an appropriate choice for you and to learn about the different options, maybe get a demo of them, and definitely for training on them.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. And you're right when you said revolutionary. The ability to independently check your sugar and to do it easily and literally painlessly. I mean that has to be so, so nice. All right, Steve, you are last, but certainly not least. You're up to talk about your favorites.

Steven Kelley: I love the iBill. When it first came out a couple of years ago, I got one. It seemed like I got it right through Talking Books. It was so easy to get, and it was great to share with clients. And the magnifier, I haven't tried it with the latest upgrade. I just upgraded yesterday on my iPad, but I use the magnifier all the time too. It is terrific and it's just gotten better, and I love the fact now that it's right there on the home screen. That's going to make it so much easier.

With all that said, my top pick, and it's not going to be a surprise to any of you guys, is actually kind of a low-tech device. It's the talking-book player that you get free from NLS, and that's one of the reasons I love it. If you have a disability that affects your ability to read print, you can get it at no charge. And if you don't mind, I'm just going to give out the number. It's 8-8-8, N-L-S, Read. R-E-A-D. And that's, 8-8-8-6-5-7-7-3-2-3.

And the great thing about the talking book player, it's not real high technology, but it's so cool because not only is it free, it is so easy to use. I mean, you can pull it out of the box and in a couple of minutes you can get it going. And if you're not able to get it going, I know where you can get a little bit of training on it. We have two workshops on Hadley for both the standard player and the advanced player. And what's really cool I think for a lot of learners is, maybe they don't have access to the internet, maybe they're having difficulty seeing the computer screen the way that they used to, so the whole internet thing is not available to them at the moment. The cool thing about the talking book player is because it uses audio cartridges that are pretty simple, you just slip them in, you push the play button, you can get a lot of the workshops from Hadley on the talking book cartridges sent to you. So, I see it as a basic technology building block.

The next device, which is kind of similar, is the Amazon Echo. And I'm surprised none of you mentioned the Echo, just because again, it's kind of... Once it's connected... You've got to have Wi-Fi in the house. If you're not a technology person, just get that 12-year-old grandson or granddaughter in there to get it set up. And once it's set up, everything can be done by voice. Once you have the Amazon Echo set up, you can do so much cool stuff. I mean, you can do the reminders and you can do the timers and all that other stuff, but one of the things that I really love about the Amazon Echo is that you can do things like get radio reading services.

And if you don't know what a radio reading service is, you are in for such a treat. Oftentimes volunteers or human beings that read the newspaper or magazine in your local area or national area, and sometimes they even read books or play podcasts, but there's probably about 10 or 12 of them out there that broadcast on the internet. You can get those with the Amazon Echo. If you go to the section in the Hadley technology workshops and look up the Alexa, in one of those workshops, I believe it's the last one, it's the one on music, podcasts and radio reading services, you'll find a great handout in addition to a wonderful workshop, but click on that resources section and you'll get a handout that lists all of those cool radio reading services so you can just have your digital assistant start one up and you can listen to it during the day. So, if you want to catch the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, or maybe your local paper, you can do that all with the Amazon Echo, which I think is so cool.

And last but not least, it's the Voice Dream Reader app. I'm a real reader and I use that app all the time. Just about every night, I have a book that's open and using Voice Dream Reader app to read it. It's so cool because it not just Bookshare that you can use. You can use a wide variety of things. You can drag in a webpage, you can drag in a PDF file or a Word document, or pretty much anything that you want and have Voice Dream Reader read it to you. And the cool thing, for low vision folks like myself, is you can change the background and foreground color, you can change the font size, change the speed, the voice, all of that stuff. And I think it's a $10 app. I cannot believe the value that I personally have gotten out of it. So those are my three. Great choices I think everybody.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, I would agree. I love Steve how all of yours are related to books, which is no surprise given that you're a co-host of the Book Nook. So, it's great to hear so many versatile choices for technology and how each of you is using those things. I am happy to have gotten the chance to listen to you all, because even though I knew what your choices were, I didn't know exactly how you would explain those things and talk about how you use them in your daily lives. So, it's been really, really nice. Any final words from anybody as we wrap up this?

Douglas Walker: I tell you what's fun for me is that I learned a lot today. From Tiffany and the app that she mentioned, the magnifier app and the glucose thing that Jennifer shared and Steve, the Voice Dream Reader app is one of my go-to things too. A lot of fun.

Jennifer Ottowitz: And just to throw out, everyone else on the panel, including Ricky, is a testament to this. For anybody that's a little intimidated by technology, just dive in, explore, figure things out from trial and error. They are experts at it. They have a real passion for it. But even if you're not, you're an average user, a little intimidated, technology can be a really helpful part of your everyday life.

Ricky Enger: All right. Thank you everybody for spending a little bit of your time with me, it has been a delight. It's been a lot of fun and it's been really informative. So, thanks again for joining me for this.

Steven Kelley: Great pleasure.

Tiffany Mpofu: Thanks, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: 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.