

History of the AAC Trade Association and links to Communication Matters

Pre-1999 (Chairman: Ken Pennington)

The commercial members of Communication Matters (CM) formed an internal association called CASC (Communication Aid Suppliers Consortium) and by the late 1990s, they were meeting under the chairmanship of Ken Pennington (Mardis) to discuss the AAC sector of industry, despite most of them being business rivals.

Membership of CASC was automatic for commercial members of CM, and there was no extra cost involved, although only the larger organisations tended to send delegates to the CASC meetings (except when meetings were held at the annual CM Symposium). In addition, the Chair of CASC was automatically deemed to be a Trustee of CM and therefore attended CM Board meetings and had a vote on issues relating to CM.

1999-2002 (Chairman: Simon Churchill)

In 1999 Ken Pennington retired and Simon Churchill (Toby Churchill) was elected as the new Chairman of CASC for a three-year period, during which time he spent a great deal of effort providing information for and supporting any work done by CM in relation to the government-sponsored Communication Aid Project (CAP) that came into being in 2002.

During this time the members of CASC were Cambridge Adaptive Communication; Crick Computing; Don Johnston Special Needs Ltd; Easiads Ltd; GEWA (UK) Ltd; Granada Learning; Inclusive Technology Ltd; Liberator Ltd; Morphonics; Penny & Giles Computer Products Ltd; Photon Technologies Ltd; Possum Controls Ltd; Prentke Romich International; QED 2000 Ltd; Richard Hill & Associates; Ritchie Electronics; RSL Steeper Ltd; Sunrise Medical Ltd (DynaVox); Techcess Ltd; Toby Churchill Ltd; Vocation; and Widgeit Software Ltd.

2002-2005 (Chairman: David Morgan)

At the end of 2002, with Simon coming to the end of his three-year chairmanship, an election was held to determine the next Chair. Simon decided against standing again, and three new candidates put their names forward, David Weatherburn (PRI), Philip Robinson (Possum) and David Morgan (DynaVox). CM's Patrick Poon organised a postal vote with all the commercial members eligible to vote. David Morgan was elected Chair for a three-year period.

Significant changes happened within the commercial sector during these years, with Cambridge Adaptive and Gewa (UK) Ltd. both being acquired by Possum; DynaVox separating from Sunrise Medical; and Easiads being closed down as the owner retired. New companies also came into the field, such as Sensory Software and Madhouse Software.

During this period concerns emerged regarding the power and authority of CASC. The main issue was that Chairmanship was always from a supplier within the AAC industry and the final authority, especially in relationship to complaints about a member, was bestowed upon the Chair. How could the Chair be impartial when they worked for a competitive organisation?

In addition, CASC had little or no authority to take any real action against a member, for instance if a complaint was made against that company and was deemed to be upheld. The only measure CASC could take would be to suspend or remove the organisation from CASC membership - although in reality that would have little or no effect, and therefore it ceased to be a check against malpractice.

Although there had not been any real problems that required such serious action, nevertheless the issue remained. The members, therefore, discussed routes that CASC

could take to improve the security and integrity of the association and in 2005 it was suggested that the Chair of CASC should meet with the Director General (DG) of the BHTA (the British Healthcare Trades Association) - the biggest Trade Association covering suppliers of medical equipment in the UK - with a view to CASC becoming part of that organisation.

BHTA was an independent Trade Association with a mandatory Code of Practice monitored by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), and had procedures that allowed for issues relating to an AAC supplier to be dealt with by an organisation that was not part of the AAC sector. In addition it was felt that AAC suppliers would show their own integrity by being part of such an association.

After discussions with BHTA it was agreed that AAC suppliers could become a new sector of the BHTA if the commercial members of CM agreed. All commercial members were encouraged to vote on the matter and those that did voted unanimously to join BHTA and disband CASC.

All CM commercial members were invited to join BHTA and the ten who did were: Liberator Ltd; Madhouse Software; Possum Controls Ltd; Prentke Romich International; QED 2000 Ltd; Sensory Software; DynaVox Systems Ltd; Techcess Ltd; Toby Churchill Ltd; and Wigit Software Ltd.

It was agreed that the new sector of BHTA would be called eCAT - being electronic Communication and Assistive Technology. The logic behind the name was that member companies not only supplied AAC devices (Communication Technology) but also Electronic Assistive Technology (EAT) for allowing people with disabilities or the elderly to stay independent in their own homes.

2005-2008 (Chairman: David Morgan)

One of the first activities of the new sector was to elect a Chair and Vice Chair. David Morgan (DynaVox), who had been the previous Chair of CASC, and who had orchestrated the move from CASC to BHTA, was requested to remain as Chair, with David Weatherburn (PRI) as Vice Chair. Like CASC, the Chair normally remained in place for a three-year period with a maximum term of six years allowed. As he had already been Chair of CASC for three years, David Morgan would only be Chair for one three-year term.

This new BHTA sector, eCAT, was invited to make presentations at the annual CM Symposium and the Chair continued to write a column in the CM Journal. Previous CASC members who had not joined BHTA were encouraged to do so, but none did - perhaps put off by the cost of membership.

Members of eCAT benefitted from: access to Health Service decision makers through the Director General of BHTA; access to senior government officials through firstly an existing MP who sat on the board of BHTA and later a member of the House of Lords who replaced the MP; and also an independent and anonymous method of accumulating and producing sales statistics of AAC products sold annually, allowing member companies to compare their own figures with the totals, to see how their market share changed year by year. This data was also used in funding projects (e.g. the Bercow Report).

A major change during the first three years of eCAT was that CM Trustees ruled that the Chair of eCAT should not be a Trustee of CM in case of a conflict of interest. The Chair of BHTA eCAT agreed to step down as a Trustee but would attend Board meetings in future in an advisory capacity only, with no voting powers.

Meanwhile, at the suggestion of the CM Board of Trustees, the commercial members of CM who had not joined BHTA were invited to elect a representative to also attend CM Board meetings, but although an election was made, this group never really started and non-BHTA members remained unrepresented at CM Trustees' meetings.

2009-2010 (Chair: David Weatherburn)

Elections were held in 2008 and David Weatherburn was elected the new Chair, with effect from the start of 2009, with Paul Hawes (Smartbox / Sensory Software) as Vice Chair. At the same time ex Chair David Morgan was elected as a Director of BHTA, so now AAC had a presence at the highest level of this large Trade Association.

However shortly after being elected Chairman, David Weatherburn started his own new business which took a great deal of his time meaning that he could not dedicate the time he would have liked to eCAT, so in 2010 he resigned as Chair and a call was made for new candidates to stand for election. Unfortunately, no-one volunteered.

The BHTA rules did not allow a main board director to also be the Chair of a BHTA sector, but without a Chair the AAC sector would have folded, so after only two years as a director David Morgan resigned in order to take back the reins of eCAT, supported by Ian Thompson (Liberator) as Vice Chair.

2010-2015 (Chairman: David Morgan)

By 2010 there were only a few of the original AAC suppliers still in eCAT. Of the original 10 companies PRI were no longer actively engaged in the UK market in their own name, with all sales going through Liberator; Madhouse Software had decided that the cost of membership was too much for a 'one man band'; QED had been acquired by Inclusive Technology and had therefore dropped out of eCAT; and Widgit had come to the conclusion that they should be in a Trade Association more aligned to education than health care.

However, new companies were emerging and joining eCAT, such as Ability World, Logan Technologies, and Meandi Business Services. In addition, Techcess had by now split into Mounts and More specialising in mounting systems and Techcess dedicated to supplying AAC devices, resulting in two member companies rather than one.

Another change at this time was that the CM Board decided it was no longer appropriate for the BHTA eCAT Chair to attend full Board Meetings, so the Chair was invited to attend purely to give an update from BHTA, but this became impractical due to the location of the meetings and the distances involved, sometimes for a five minute presentation. eCAT updates were supplied through the CM Journal.

Major changes occurred in the marketplace as new technologies, especially Eyegaze, came more to the fore, and the iPad with very low-cost apps became a popular off-the-shelf solution for some users at a fraction of the price of a dedicated AAC device. Some AAC suppliers embraced these new technologies, others decided to stay with tried and tested, dedicated devices.

The second decade of the 21st century saw eCAT move forward again with ten members: Ability World; Liberator; Logan Technology; Meandi Business Services; Mounts & More; Possum; Sensory Software/Smartbox; Dynavox Systems; Techcess; and Toby Churchill Ltd.

Subsequently, however, the number of companies slowly diminished. David Weatherburn withdrew Ability World due to changes in their direction; Logan left as they felt there was an insufficient benefit; Possum withdrew from the AAC market; and DynaVox relocated with new staff and then was acquired by Swedish company Tobii, who were not interested in a UK Trade Association. Toby Churchill was acquired by another Swedish company Abilia, and although remaining a member of eCAT, changes in personnel meant that it was rare to have any input from the company.

In 2013 David Morgan closed Meandi Business Services as a limited company and although remaining as Chair, at the request of the remaining members, active membership was thus reduced to just four companies.

By 2015 Liberator had also decided to leave eCAT (by now renamed as the AAC Sector) and when David Morgan announced he was officially retiring from AAC at the end of that year, the remaining companies decided not to continue with eCAT although some have remained members of BHTA working within other sectors.