



The AbleNet story begins in 1980, when Lee Hallgren, a research chemist with Minnesota-based Honeywell Corporation, saw a news story about a child with cerebral palsy. Hallgren was immediately intrigued with “a clunky piece of equipment, a rudimentary switch” attached to the boy’s foot that allowed him to communicate for the first time. Bothered by the impractical nature of the foot-activated device, Hallgren contacted Minneapolis-based United Cerebral Palsy Center (UCPC) with an offer to help the organization develop a professionally engineered switch.

Hallgren was put in touch with Cheryl Volkman, a certified occupational therapist assistant and the director of UCPC’s Preschool Developmental Achievement Center, also known as AccessAbility. Together, they designed a prototype switch that could be connected to any battery-operated device. The switch featured an oversized activation surface that responded to the slightest touch. Thanks to Hallgren’s affiliation with Honeywell, these design features catapulted it years ahead of the homemade switches available at the time.

Hallgren and Volkman tested the switch with a battery-operated drumming bear and introduced it to the kids in the AccessAbility program. For the first time, the children could activate a toy with just a slight touch of the switch. The bear and the switch were an instant hit with the children and they were motivated to use it again and again.

Several key people at Honeywell took an interest in the switch project, and they inspired dozens of volunteers from Honeywell, Minnesota-based 3M, EcoLab and other corporations to lend their expertise. Everyone, it seemed, was beginning to see possibilities beyond simply adapting battery-operated toys. The question was: would the rest of the world see those same possibilities? Enter Jackie Levin, a speech pathologist with a master’s degree in Communication Disorders. Levin saw tremendous potential for the switch, but instinctively knew that special education teachers and therapists would need to be on board and understand how the device could help students achieve success and reach their goals.

To clear that hurdle, Hallgren, Volkman, Levin and Mary Kay Walch, a certified occupational therapist assistant who joined AccessAbility’s preschool staff, invited teachers, therapists, parents and children to participate in “Santa’s Workshops.” These no-frills gatherings allowed the foursome to demonstrate how easy it was to use the switch with any battery-operated toy. The response was overwhelming. Special Education professionals and parents were seeing children activate their favorite toys without the assistance of an adult – often for the first time in their lives.

Word spread quickly and calls began flooding into AccessAbility. It was clear that the professionally designed switch could be marketed to educators and caregivers of children with physical and cognitive disabilities, enabling them to participate in a wide array of activities. Inspired, Hallgren went on to develop PowerLink®, a control unit for adapting electrically-operated devices such as blenders, popcorn poppers and other small appliances known to motivate children with disabilities.

Hallgren’s prototype switch, dubbed BIG Red® for its bright red activation surface, evolved into a streamlined product that was field-tested in special education classrooms. Approximately 130 volunteers assembled the switches for field testing in 1983 at 100 schools.

Still operating as a division of AccessAbility, AbleNet was launched as a non-profit organization in 1985. Additional assistive technology products were developed, resourced and brought to market; each supported the new company's philosophy that "everyone can participate, communicate and learn." By 1990, sales pushed the \$1 million mark, and with the help of Ed Law, a seasoned local businessman and angel investor, AbleNet was spun off as a partially employee-owned, for-profit company with Cheryl Volkman at the helm. Today, AbleNet is 100 percent employee-owned with 35 devoted employees and a network of independent distributors who represent the company in over 50 countries.

AbleNet offers a complete line of assistive technologies, and is one of the only companies that develop research-based special education curricula for students with disabilities ranging from mild and moderate to severe/profound. The AbleNet commitment to people, products, service and support has helped push sales over the \$10 million mark in 2007.

### **Where Are They Today?**

In 2007, Cheryl Volkman handed the reins of president and CEO to a well-qualified successor, Jennifer Thalhuber. Thalhuber first joined AbleNet, Inc., as V.P. of Sales and Marketing in 2006, and previously was CEO of Atka Software. Volkman now focuses on research and development as well as building partnerships with organizations that are also dedicated to developing educational and technological solutions for adults and children with disabilities.

One of AbleNet's first employees Mary Kay Walch, is still with the company. Jackie Levin has since left the company to pursue many other personal ventures with the same dedication to disenfranchised individuals. Lee Hallgren retired from Honeywell in 1990, and continues to volunteer his time and expertise to AbleNet.