

Be My Eyes, Hans Jørgen Wiberg

Hello. My name is Hans Wiberg. I'm the founder of Be My Eyes. This is Usher Talk. I'm very honored to be invited to do this talk.

A little bit about myself. In the beginning, I have retinitis pigmentosa myself. I have about 5 degree vision left. And I'm also hearing impaired.

And what is Be My Eyes? Be My Eyes is an app. It's an app for smartphone. It's a really simple app. It makes a live video connection between a blind person's smartphone and a sighted volunteer's smartphone.

This means that you, as blind or low vision person, can get visual assistance 24/7 via your smartphone. All you have to do is pull out your phone and press one button. And then we will find a volunteer for you. And when a volunteer has accepted, we make a live video connection between you and the volunteer.

And then you can just show them what you have in front of you. And they can say you what it is, and can read a text or tell you when the expiry date or what your oven is set to or things like that. But I'll get more into that later.

And you can say, why not just use Skype or FaceTime? But if you're using Skype or FaceTime, you will have to call a specific person. You cannot call a random person using Skype. So that's the difference between using Skype and Be My Eyes.

It's a really simple app. There's only two buttons. One of them is called First Available Volunteer, and the other one is called Specialized Help. And I'll get back to the second one later.

If you are a volunteer, it's even more simple because you can basically not do anything. You can just wait for someone to call. So that's super simple.

It works like this. If we have, for instance, Mike. He is living in Hong Kong. It's 11 o'clock at night, and he needs to see something. And then he take out his phone and pressed the call the first available volunteer.

And then when he does that, we will send a notification to 10 different people because we don't know what our volunteers are doing. And some of them are working, and some of them are driving. And some of them are at a meeting, and some of them are with their family. And they don't want to help because they don't have the time.

But most likely, one of those or maybe two of those 10 people are available and say, yes, I want to help. In this case, because it is late at night, we sent out to people not in Hong Kong because that's too late to call someone. Then we just call someone in a time zone where it is not that late. So we have Jane in London. And she is available.

And she press, yes, I want to help. And then when she does that, we make the live video connection. And then she can tell Mike what's in front of him. So it's really a super simple app.

I mentioned that we are not calling people late at night or in the night for that matter. We only call up volunteers between 8 o'clock in the morning and 9 o'clock at night. So if you need help after that, we just call someone in another time zone. And this is-- this picture I'm showing you now is kind of showing the connection between sighted and blind people across the globe. And there's quite a few lines.

And what are we helping people with? One of the-- maybe not that common-- but a story is that we had a lady in Finland who was at her son's first badminton match. And she was completely blind. She had no clue what was going on.

And then she was using Be My Eyes to have this match described to her. And the volunteer was a little surprised, but, this interpretation, you can say. But more often, it is a matter of finding the right shirt, make sure that your two socks are the same color, or the clothes that you are wearing is matching. And if it is clean, you want to make sure there's no stain on your shirt or something like that. And you can use Be My Eyes for that.

This is a really rare example, but still super important. We had this lady who felt that she needed to do a pregnancy test. And she could do the test, but she could not read the result.

And she was using Be My Eyes to have the result of her pregnancy test read to her. And I'm super proud of this example because this is basically her only way of doing this without involving someone in her surroundings. And some information you just want to have for yourself, maybe just for an hour or two, before you involve your surroundings in this kind of information.

More common is that you get a piece of mail. And you don't know if it is something that's important, or you can throw it out or what. And then now you can use Be My Eyes to find out who is the letter from or something like that.

The most common use of Be My Eyes is in the kitchen. A lot of people who are blind or low vision are living alone. And they also need to do some cooking.

And sometimes you are a little bit in doubt what it is you have in front of you. And maybe you need to have the instructions read to you. And then a lot of people are using Be My Eyes to find out what is in this can or how many minutes does this need to be in the microwave or what kind of flowers this and all this kind of stuff.

The picture I'm showing you now is a kind of a toilet in Japan. In Japan, they have some super fancy toilet with a whole bunch of buttons. And this blind guy, he wanted to know what would happen when he pressed one of the buttons.

And people are also using Be My Eyes for many other kind of stuff. Also, setting your temperature or your air condition and finding out new surroundings. Or if you kind of know where the door is into a building, but you're not exactly sure, then you can use Be My Eyes to find the right door or the right bell to ring or something like that.

I mentioned there was two buttons on the app. And the second button is called Specialized Help. It's a pretty new thing that we are working on.

For instance, if you are on your computer and you're working with Microsoft program and it doesn't work as it's supposed to, then you can use the Specialized Help function. And then you can call the Microsoft support line directly using Be My Eyes. The good thing is that Microsoft also get the video feed. So they can see what you're pointing at with your phone.

And then it is way easier for the support desk to help you because I think everybody has tried to call someone. And the first thing they ask is, OK, what's on the screen now? Or how many green lights is flashing right now? And if you are a blind person, you cannot say that. So because of the video feed, it is way easier for Microsoft to give you a good support.

And maybe even better thing, for us at least, for Be My Eyes is that Microsoft is paying Be My Eyes a monthly fee. So we help them help their blind customers. Be My Eyes is a free app. And it is also free to call Microsoft.

We hope to add a whole bunch of companies on this Specialized Help section so that we can help with many different products that blind people are using, and they maybe need support once in a while. And we are also hoping that we can add telco companies and banks and all the major household machinery brands and so on. And if you have some good ideas, please send them my way.

It looks like this. As I mentioned, those are two buttons on the screen. And then if you select the Specialized Help, then you will get into a menu. And then you can scroll up and down until you find the company that you need.

And then you will call that company. The company may not have open 24/7. But then there will be opening hours, and so you know when to call them.

As you know, there's a lot of blind people in this world. And UN tells me that there's 253 million blind or low vision people. Out of those 250 million, it's about 35 million that are blind people. So it's really a big group of people that we are working with.

A little bit about myself. I am 54 years old and, as I mentioned, almost blind. I have 5 degree vision left in my tunnel vision. And I'm working together with my wife in her upholstery when I'm not working with Be My Eyes. I must admit that I'm working with Be My Eyes most of the time.

But it's a great combination that you can do something with your hand and then back to the computer. So I'm really happy about this. I live in Denmark. And I have two almost grown up girls.

We launched Be My Eyes in 2015. And we had a lot of press from day one. It was really a super, super interesting story. So we got picked up by all the major tech sites, especially in the US and Europe. And after we had been in the tech sites, we were managed to get into the more mainstream media, especially in the US and England but also in France and Germany and all major countries in the Western world, you can say.

Some of the more interesting stories was that we were-- I was interviewed by a Russian radio. It was a live radio show. So they had to translate.

I don't speak Russian, so they had to translate back and forward for me. It was kind of stressful but also super interesting. Blind people from Russia called in and asked me questions about Be My Eyes, so that was super interesting.

I live in Denmark. So in the neighbor country Sweden, they have this newspaper for blind people that I was interviewed to. And that is, of course, the most interesting thing for me. It's super fun to be interviewed by CNN. But the most important thing for Be My Eyes is really to be mentioned in news outlet that is focused on blind people.

One of the most interesting thing that we had PR-wise was that the CBS Evening News on the 4th of July made a small piece about Be My Eyes. And it was two ladies live together, a white lady and a black lady. And they were both blind. And they were using Be My Eyes. So you can imagine this was kind of a story that I could not have imagined been told better myself. And this was kind of the highlight of my press career.

We are using Twitter a whole lot because, as I mentioned, it's a free app. So we don't have that much money for marketing. Basically, we don't have any money for marketing. And so we are using Twitter and Facebook a whole lot. And all you guys are super nice to tweet about us and retweet and so on. And it's a great joy to read when some of our users are tweeting about us.

And this guy here is tweeting, thank you to Be My Eyes. Thanks to my Be My Eyes helper, I learned that my breakfast sausage was expired. She was really excited to help me. Thanks.

And this is a typical example of people that have been using Be My Eyes. And then they decide to make a tweet about it. Another tweet goes, I just got my first Be My Eyes request. A man from Iraq needed help identifying his health/birth document. I felt so fulfilled I could cry.

And this reminds me that I get a lot of emails from our volunteers really excited about being able to do what seems to be a small thing. But I think we all know that this being able to help someone is a super nice feeling. And sometimes I'm in doubt who am I

helping the most, the blind people or the volunteers, because the volunteers really grateful for being able to participate in this.

We also get tweets in many different languages. And that can be kind of a challenge sometimes. I think this one is in Japanese or something like that. But there's a translation option built into Twitter. I'm super happy about it.

On the personal side, I have been meeting with Stevie Wonder at the Season Conference in San Diego. Actually, I've met him twice. And this has been a great, great honor for me to have this opportunity to meet a legend. So I'm super happy for that.

Maybe I should just now mention that we have to this day 84,000 blind people signed up using Be My Eyes. And we have 1.4 million volunteers across the globe. And these numbers are to me amazing, but maybe even more amazing that we can now provide 24/7 free assistance in 182 different languages, which I find totally astonishing and makes me really, really proud.

The picture I'm showing now is a group of people who are wandering around staring in their mobile phone. I think we all know that's how it goes on these days. And they all have a white cane.

And what I'm dreaming about is that we can get Be My Eyes into the hands of any blind person across the world, so we don't need our white canes anymore. And we can hand them over to the sighted people who are not paying attention when they are walking around staring into their phones. This is, of course, just a joke.

But the thing is that I'm dreaming about that we can really help blind people all over the world. We are kind of doing that now but not in big numbers in developing countries. But we have launched an Android version of Be My Eyes. And we can see that is really picking up in India and also in South Africa and also other parts of Africa. And those two continent is where the most blind people they live.

So this is super, super important for us that we are able to help blind people all over the world. And this is also why we are fighting to keep Be My Eyes as a free app because we believe that accessibility is also financial accessibility. It doesn't matter if you can have a good product if you cannot afford it. So we believe that it is the way forward to keep it as a free app. Also, so we can have blind people in India and Africa also benefit from this modern technology.

And the price of being online is just going one way. This graph is just showing the prices from 1999 to 2012. And it is just a declining curve of the cost of being online. And I don't have any expectation that they will be otherwise. So I don't know if it will be completely free. But it will be cheaper and cheaper to be online. And in fact, in India is one of the cheapest places on the earth to be online with your smartphone. So I really hope that also blind people will be able to afford to be online.

One of the funnier thing that I have experienced is that the newspaper or foreign policy-- they announced that I was among the 100 global thinkers in 2015. I know this is a little old one but still. And I was really surprised to find myself on that list. And I think I can honestly say that none of my school teachers expected me to be on a list of global thinkers at any point. On the other hand, none of my school teachers were on the list either, so I think that's kind of even.

One more short story. We had a lady from Washington who was about to sing in her choir. And she needed to make sure she had black shoes on. And she was using Be My Eyes to find out what pair of shoes were the black one.

When she made the call, the lady who picked up the call it was from Ireland. And the lady in Washington said, I need to find my black shoes because I am going to sing in my choir. Oh, are you singing in a choir? I am in singing in a choir too.

And then they forgot all about the black shoes. And they started to talk about what are you singing in your choir, and what are we singing, and so on. And later they got back to the black shoes and so on.

The whole story ended because the volunteer in Ireland-- she was in the middle of singing with her choir. So the call ended with this Irish choir singing for the lady in Washington. This is, of course, not a super usual story.

But still, it tells about that it's super cozy, and people enjoy make these calls. And they sometimes turn out in an unexpected way. One of the members of the choir in Ireland, he ended the call with saying that this is our first international gig. And he was kind of right about that.

I hope that you have now got a kind of an understanding of what Be My Eyes is. And it is a free app. So you can just download it in the app store, and you can try it out and see if it is something that you want to use. And if it is, then I'm super happy. And if you like one of the other options that is around, then feel free to use that.

As a blind person myself, I find it super important that you try all the options and find out what is exactly working for you. And most important, don't ever rely on technology. Rely on your white cane and your blind skills, which is the most important thing that you can educate yourself with. So thank you so much for listening. I hope it wasn't too long. And hope to see you soon. Bye-bye.