Hadley

The Many Uses of GPS with Vision Loss

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, we discuss practical uses of GPS for people who are blind or low vision. And our guest is Hadley's Chief Innovation Officer, Doug Walker. Welcome to the show, Doug.

Douglas Walker: It's always great to be here with you, Ricky. We have a lot of fun.

Ricky Enger: Good to have you back. You were on a podcast talking about kitchen gadgets and favorite apps.

Douglas Walker: Anything tech related, just call my name and I'll come running. So here you go. We'll see what we can do with GPS today. It's going to be fun.

Ricky Enger: Oh, I agree. And if you put Apple on the end of it.

Douglas Walker: Oh my goodness, please, you'll have to count the number of times I say Apple in today's podcast. Keep a tally out there.

Ricky Enger: That's right. Well, for people who might be a little newer to Hadley Presents and Hadley in general, and maybe they've not heard you before, give us just a brief intro. Tell us a bit about who you are and what you do.

Douglas Walker: Okay. Well, I've been at Hadley for goodness 11 years now, and I'm responsible for new concept designs and some new content creation. I have a really fun job because I get to create a lot of different types of workshops but mainly workshops on Apple devices. I'm also the host of the Insights and Sound Bites podcast, and I'll plug that one in here, Ricky. It's a brand-new podcast here at Hadley, so check that one out too. Also, I have really low vision, actually, legally blind goodness, 2,700 acuity. So anyway, that's just a little bit about me.

Ricky Enger: Perfect. Thanks for that. And again, good to have you on, especially for today's topic. It's interesting because we talk about GPS a lot or people hear it kind of everywhere. You might know what it is and you might have a vague idea of what it is, or you might just look it up and go Global Positioning Satellite, gosh, that's helpful. Maybe it would be helpful to frame this in a way that we all start from the same place. So when you think about GPS, what comes to mind for you?

Douglas Walker: Well, I'm glad you said the word global positioning, that's about my end of the scientific knowledge on this. It pretty much ends right there, but I know that it's a bunch of satellites going around the earth. It sort of pinpoints exactly where I am, which is kind of creepy when you think about it. But they can't just pinpoint where you are without some type of device, like a smartphone or some type of tablet, or even my Apple Watch has GPS built into it. But when people think about GPS, they usually think of driving directions for a car, like a Garmin or something like that, something you can put in the location and it gets you there. For me, as a low vision user, I love the fact that my smartphone has walking directions in it. So it's really cool because I can just get step by step directions for where I want to go.

I also like it because I can kind of look at where I want to go and get the directions before I even leave the location and sort of review them before I have to go. So it gives you that sense of security of being able to kind of know what's going to happen without just setting off walking. Of course, I'm an Apple fan, so I tend to use Apple Maps, but Google Maps also has walking directions as well. I love it because I can just say, "Siri give me walking directions to Starbucks or McDonald's." Off I go and it gives me the directions, and as I'm walking it'll say, "Hey, in 200 feet turn left on so-and-so street." You just keep following the directions like that. So it's just that added sense of security just knowing where you're going. But mostly for me, I use it for walking directions.

Ricky Enger: And it's so much nicer than if we didn't have that and maybe we would have to learn a route before we were able to go there independently. We'd have to first walk with somebody else or get really good descriptions of what was going to happen and then maybe write that down. So it's good not to have to do that.

Douglas Walker: It's still not bad to do that though. I mean, yeah, you kind of learn a route and then you use this again as sort of a security blanket like I said, or it's an extra sense of confidence as you travel. But yeah, you could just set off on your own. I've done that before, but I tend to use it even on routes that I've been before, just as that extra sense of knowing where I am.

Ricky Enger: I think that's helpful as well. And when I'm thinking about how GPS works, just like you, I really appreciate having the walking directions. But you mentioned something that I guess is my favorite thing about what GPS can do beyond giving you directions right then, and that is getting that ability to virtually explore ahead of time. So before you even walk out the door, just that ability to look around, so to speak, before you set off and get some idea of what's around you. When you're using GPS, you mentioned walking directions. Are there other things that you will use it for beyond just the walking directions or maybe the driving directions if you're in the car with somebody?

Douglas Walker: Yeah, and I think you've mentioned one just right off the bat, looking up points of interest when I need to locate the Apple store or a restaurant. I do this not only around my home, but if I'm in another city at a conference or visiting a friend or something. I can look around and see the different types of restaurants that are around. A really cool thing that I like to use it is it'll give you the local bus stops in my area, so it will tell me where the bus stop is. And what I love about it is the GPS is also tracking the bus, so it can give me updates on how long before it gets to my bus stop. I'm not just sitting, wondering when that bus is coming. It tells me it'll be here in five minutes or whatever. So that's super handy as well.

Ricky Enger: And I think that when people think about GPS, those are the little things that don't always pop right into their minds. It's like you said, people are thinking about, well, I could have it in my car if I were driving, but the vast majority of people who are losing their vision aren't driving. So having these other things that GPS is useful for, I think can help a lot when you think about what tools are out there for me.

Douglas Walker: I do have a really good sense of direction and not so much my wife, it's totally opposite there, but I can't drive and she's the driver in our family. So, what it gives me is I'm the navigator, like you talked about earlier. Actually we took a trip just this last weekend and it was my job to get the driving directions going and I could say, "Hey, it's saying get over in the next lane." Or "Get off with this next exit right here." And it's kind of cool because I'm responsible for finding, if we need gasoline, looking along the route to see the next gas station that's coming up, or even if there's some type of fast food if we start getting hungry. So that's really cool to have that contribution to the driving or to the trip. But I've also used GPS when I'm taking an Uber or a Lyft just for security to keep track of where I am along the way. Or even taking the bus as I mentioned earlier, knowing where the bus was when it gets to me. But while I'm on the bus, it's kind of cool to find where I am on the bus because all I have to do again is say, "Siri, where am I," and Siri automatically just speaks the address of where I am, so I know how far I am on my route, and if my stop where I want to get off is coming up. So that's really a cool way to use it.

Ricky Enger: I find that helpful as well being a passenger, whether it's with somebody I know and like you said, okay, let's find the nearest gas station or whatever. Or if I'm with somebody, I don't know. So Uber and Lyft are a perfect example of this that I use as well. We hope to be trusting of people, but I guess trust but verify is kind of the good approach to take there. So if you are checking out where you're going and you suddenly know, "Hey, wait a minute, this doesn't seem to be the same route that I'm going." Then that's just some good situational awareness to have, and it's some good peace of mind when you know, "Oh hey, the driver's taking me exactly where I have designated and off we go." I've got that, just that peace of mind following along back here with my little GPS and figuring out where we're going.

Douglas Walker: That is so cool. And I've had a friend of mine that actually got out of a cab one time because she didn't feel comfortable. The cab was going, and she was very familiar with the area, so she knew she wasn't going the right way that she should be. She actually asked the driver to pull over and got out and then called for another driver. So there is that, and there's a lot of security of knowing where you are with a GPS, and it takes a lot to ask somebody to pull over. But I think that's cool that she knew where she was and she knew something wasn't right or felt something wasn't right.

Another really cool way that I use it is the Find My app as GPS. I mean that all relies upon GPS and it's an app that's on the iPhone where you can share your location with either a friend or a family member. So my daughter and my wife share their location with me and that's another form of having peace of mind, instead of having to text where are you? Or did you get there? Or be wondering if somebody got safely back home or to their dorm. In the case of my daughter, I can just look at Find My app. And again, that's great for peace of mind.

Another thing that's in that Find My app that's really cool is also the AirTags that are there and we do have workshops on AirTags. If you don't know about AirTags, they're really cool. Another Apple product, about the size of a quarter and you can place them on any device. So I have mine on keychains that I attach to things. I've got one in my wallet, on my backpack and cane, and one in my suitcase. So I really think it's cool because I found my baggage at the carousel on my own one time. That was really kind of cool. I could tell it was coming.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, that's awesome. And of course if you don't have an Apple product, believe it or not, the world does not run exclusively on Apple, I know it's a shocker. There are similar things like the Tile which are kind of similar to AirTags and you can get those for your Apple device or your Android device. It's an app that you install and then it's sort of like AirTags. They can be the size of a quarter or there are bigger ones, and I have put mine in a purse or my luggage. I have one on my book reader because I kept leaving it places and I needed to be able to find it. So that is definitely a good use of GPS that has really nothing to do with walking or driving.

Douglas Walker: Got to love it. Now I usually use my smartphone for GPS, but Ricky, for people that don't have a smartphone, are there any options for still taking advantage for what GPS can do for us?

Ricky Enger: Yeah, actually there are a few things. So there are some phones that are not quite smartphones, but they're not quite not smartphones. They do have some very basic GPS features. It's basically where am I? So you might not get a lot of these looking around at points of interest, but you can at least get some idea of which street am I on? Which address am I near? So, I know that the BlindShell Classic 2 is one phone that does this, the RealSAM Pocket does this, but I don't really have direct experience with those phones.

I do have some experience with a couple of products from HumanWare. I own one of them and it's the Victor Reader Trek. This is just a little device that you carry around and it uses GPS, but it does a lot of other stuff as well. You can read audiobooks and listen to internet radio, you can read electronic textbooks, things like that. But it has GPS. And the cool thing about this is it has buttons, so it's not a phone and it's not that problematic touch screen that a lot of people just really struggle with. I especially kind of like not having to fiddle with a touch screen as I'm walking down the street. So this has this nice raised keypad and you're able to input an address or you're able to look around for points of interest, you're able to record a route. So maybe you walk a route once and that is recorded so that you can kind of retrace that, which I think is really cool.

Then there's another HumanWare product that I don't have but would love to. And that's the Victor Stellar Trek. This one really is for GPS exclusively because it does all of this GPS stuff. It doesn't have the book reader, but one cool thing that it does do in addition to all of the other stuff that the Victor Reader Trek does, it has a camera on it, so it can help you with things like that last 40 feet. So you get to the address, but now where's the door or which office is this? It's going to take pictures of those things and tell you, "Yes, you are at the right address, but this is Suite 200." Or "You're at the right address, but you got to get across this parking lot and the door is actually a little bit to your left."

Douglas Walker: Oh, yeah.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. I guess the biggest problem anyway that I tend to deal with is, okay, I got there, now how do I get to the final bit of the destination? Do you have things that you use for that?

Douglas Walker: Well, I do, and you're absolutely right. I mean the GPS is great about getting us there, but like you said, it's always that last 20, 40 feet to the building. I actually use Aira. It's an app on your smartphone that you can call and they look through the back of your camera on your phone and you contacted an agent there, and they can actually help guide you that last 20 or 40 feet to the door and actually help navigate you through a building. That's a really, really nice service. Also Be My Eyes, I don't usually use it for navigating, but once I get in, I've used Be My Eyes for things like reading text maybe or identifying something. I do have some vision, so I'll use my Magnifier app that’s built into my iPhone to read things as well.

Also, I'll use the iPhone as kind of a telescope. If we're looking at distance as well, I can do that. Oh, the Magnifier app also has built-in people detection and door detection, so it can be hit-and-miss at times, but that's kind of cool that it’s in there. It's working on working. But I'll tell you something that really works is the text recognition through the Magnifier app. It's really great at reading signs or numbers on doors and stuff like that. So yeah, those two. And there's other apps as well. I know that you use the Seeing AI app, I guess?

Ricky Enger: I do use that, and I will use that to read signs and I also use the Envision app to do that. I actually have the Envision Glasses, which is nice because you can wear those on your face, but they don't improve your vision at all. What they do though is it's a camera. So you can use something like Aira or you have a trusted friend that you can call through those glasses, or you just use it to read the text, like you said, on the signs or which door is this, now that I'm inside the building.

Douglas Walker: That is so nice. And your hands are free when you're traveling.

Ricky Enger: Which is so good because, I mean, how many times are you carrying something? Plus you have your cane or your dog or whatever. It's nice to just do that hands-free. And I think, you and I get really into the tech aspects of this, but I think they're handheld telescopes and things like that, magnifiers for distance viewing that even if you're not using your phone, you can still use things like that to read from a distance.

Douglas Walker: Absolutely. And I keep those backups just in case your phone goes dead or something. I have a binocular telescope in my bag and a handheld magnifier. So you always have to have those less techy things like you're saying, always reliable and always there for you as well.

Ricky Enger: Yes, exactly. And we didn't start out trying to name a lot of specific apps or specific devices. We have named a couple, but wanted to stay away from a list of all the things that work. I feel like that can get a little overwhelming, especially when you're just brand-new to learning what GPS can do for you. We just wanted to explore those concepts. You can track where your things are, you can track where you are. You can get that feeling of comfort as you're following along, and you can contribute as well by being that backseat navigator that hopefully is appreciated by people, depending on how you approach it.

Douglas Walker: Hopefully.

Ricky Enger: They might be like, "I got it. I don't want to hear your directions."

Douglas Walker: They can't just pass by those Starbucks anymore though, without you knowing one out there.

Ricky Enger: That's right. You know about it. You have the power to know about where coffee is.

Douglas Walker: Yes, absolutely.

Ricky Enger: Well, thank you so much, Doug, for dropping by and just talking about some of the uses that you use GPS for. Anything else that we didn't really touch on that you feel like we ought to circle back and mention it when it comes to just how powerful GPS can be?

Douglas Walker: Yes. Well, we touched on a lot. We covered a lot of ground here today, and I think you and I probably could talk for another hour on this subject, but thinking about GPS, it really is great. It really can help us out, but it's certainly not the cure-all because devices, like we mentioned earlier, have batteries and they can go dead. The GPS is great, when it's accurate, it's not always accurate. And in the end, I know I still need good traveling skills for myself, but I do love my gadgets, Ricky, and those walking directions as well. So, a combination of the white cane and GPS, they really do the job and work well for me.

Ricky Enger: Yes, indeed. I would second that because I think especially if you really enjoy technology, there's that tendency to, well, it can do everything for me. I think it is important to make sure that you have those backup plans if something should go wrong with your phone directions, or how can I still get myself out of this situation safely? So wow, we really did cover a lot and it's been just a wonderful time chatting with you for a bit. As you said, we could do this for another hour at least. Appreciate you stopping by and if people want to find you when you're not on this podcast, like you said earlier, there's another one that people can tune into.

Douglas Walker: Yes. Insights and Sound Bites. It's our new podcast, and it's really all about people sharing their journey through vision loss. So, check it out. It's on the Hadley website, or you can check it out on any major podcaster out there, like Apple Podcast or Spotify. So check it out, and if you would like, you can always contribute to that as well.

Ricky Enger: Love it. Well, thank you so much, Doug, for stopping by. We'll see you again soon, I'm sure.

Douglas Walker: Yes, thanks for having me on, Ricky. I appreciate it.

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.