Vision-impaired get Microsoft boost.

New Plug-in allows disabled to save large-print documents in audio format.

EVERY day, around 60 people in Australia lose their eyesight.

Turning back the clock is virtually impossible so Vision Australia is hopeful new technology would help the blind and those with low vision gain access to documents.

A new plug-in being developed for Microsoft Word would allow users to save these documents in a digital audio format called Daisy. The software would be available for free in early 2008.

Daisy was developed by the Digital Accessible Information System consortium, which leads the worldwide transition from analog to digital talking books. Vision Australia is an active member of the group.

Once the Word document is saved, users can "hear" the document using two types of Daisy players.

PC and laptop users can purchase the Daisy software player from Vision Australia for around $60.

Physical players cost between $300 and $500 but are provided for free to all Vision Australia members.

Vision Australia CEO Gerard Menses said the tool would help boost job opportunities for the blind and print-disable.

"In Australia there is about 4 million people with a print disability - the obvious cases are blindness and low vision but it also extends to dyslexia or cognitive disability and even extreme arthritis where you can't actually handle a book.

"From this group, 63 per cent are looking for work and one of the main inhibitors has been that only 5 per cent of print information is actually available in alternate formats," he said.

A significant number of the elderly make up the pool of people losing their sight each day.

"Because they're from this age group they haven't learnt Braille - which is hard to learn later in life and so they're reliant on alternate forms of information.

"The simple transformation of Word documents into audio would give them all better quality of life," Mr Menses said.

According to John Galligan, Microsoft Australia corporate affairs director, the plug-in would be compatible with Word XP, 2003 and 2007.

"You can download it from Microsoft, Daisy and SourceForge's websites," Mr Galligan said.

Mr Menses hopes Adobe would soon follow Microsoft's lead. "It would be good to simply be able to save PDF documents in a Daisy format in future."

Adobe Pacific technical director Mark Blair concurs. "We've contacted Vision Australia to see how we can work together."