



# Building Bridges of Communication for People with Disabilities

by [Angela Tafur](#) on 05/09/2013 10:43 AM CDT

**Networking Services Used:** Mobile or Online Video, Web or Video Conferencing

## 1. What problems are you hoping to solve?

Although [Give To Colombia](#) was originally envisioned to mobilize talents, resources and technologies to Colombia, we have realized that the experience is a two way street; and emerging countries in Latin America such as Colombia indeed can be places where we can find technological solutions to global problems. We are proud to share one of these examples of success.

Let's take the story of Julis; she was born deaf mute in Colombia in a family where no one knew sign language. Her father created a software to help Julis communicate with her father and friends. In 2011, Give To Colombia with the help of Cisco Systems Inc. was able to support the local Colombian grass-root non-profit organization [Hablando con Julis](#) to take this technological tool to the next level and develop a web-based version of the software to respond to educational and communication needs, improve the interface to make it more user- friendly, more interactive and, among other enhancements, translate it to English.

Hablando con Julis' software was created with the objective of giving people like Julis the opportunity to communicate with those whom surround her, as it effectively acts as the user's voice and therefore provides the person with tools to communicate with the world, and to advance academically as well.

The problem we are trying to solve here with the Hablando con Julis software addresses the high percentage of populations around the world that have difficulties communicating verbally and/or have cognitive impairment and in most cases do not receive proper pedagogical attention. The people affected with these types of disabilities encounter obstacles related to their education, social relationships, career development, and many times are excluded from society deemed to a lack of opportunities in terms of the possibility of improving their lives and those of their families. These factors have contributed to create a society indifferent to this situation and unable to recognize difference and diversity.

Any person's inner development lies in its ability to communicate and cultivate social relationships. The fact that people with disabilities many times do not have real means of communicating with other (peers, family members, or outside world) leads to a society that does not believe in their autonomy and capability to confront a myriad of different scenarios in life.

Being aware of this situation and sensing the urgent need to address it, the organization Hablando con Julis was founded as a communications and learning technological solution. It allows us to overcome the boundaries faced by children and adults when communicating with others. Often in Colombia people suffering this situation are called "incapable" a term that should be replaced by another expression that shows more respect such as "people with different capacities".

## 2. How has technology helped to solve this problem? What devices does your solution run on?"

Technology is, without a doubt, one of the most attractive and useful tools available to modern society. This is especially relevant to people with cognitive or other types of disabilities. Technology is the answer to face day-to-day difficulties. Hablando con Julis's software offers a technology tool—unique in the world— for people with disabilities to communicate with others without boundaries. The software helps people with different capacities overcome communication barriers in the following ways:

1. It allows children with disabilities to talk and/or communicate with their families, friends, and community.
2. It improves reading comprehension and writing skills levels.
3. It allows users to send and receive messages at an educational and professional level.
4. It improves cognitive abilities (attention-deficit, memory, reading comprehension, cognitive difficulties, executive functions) and therefore academic performance.
5. It elevates user's self-esteem and promotes inclusion.
6. It increases independence and autonomy, by allowing users to go to different places by themselves and communicate with their surroundings.

Throughout the years, Hablando con Julis' software has become an important tool of communication for individuals with different capacities, providing access to places that had remained longtime inaccessible to them. They can now perform day-to-day activities that they could not perform or were excluded before like: make a presentation in school, go to college, buy a ticket for the movies, ask someone on the street for directions when they are lost.

What would be of Julis (a Colombian girl with verbal communication difficulties, thanks to whom Hablando con Julis' software was created) without Hablando con Julis? How could she undertake such simple and mundane tasks as buying a soda? How could she tell us what she wants, or what she likes? How could she go to an appointment with a gynecologist and communicate appropriately with her doctor? How could she make her assigned oral presentations at school? How could she hope to find a job without the means of expressing herself? How could she communicate with her family members, her grandmother, her uncles and siblings? Without technology, these would be impossible tasks as 99.9% of the people her do not know sign language.

Thanks to Hablando con Julis's software, people with different kinds of difficulties have been able to demonstrate that they are as capable and as deserving of opportunity, as any other person.

Thanks to the support of Give To Colombia and Cisco Systems Inc., Hablando con Julis' software can now be used for free on any computer or mobile device, through Hablando con Julis' website:[www.hablandoconjulis.org](http://www.hablandoconjulis.org). It may be used by everyone with no restrictions. A more personalized version of the software can be downloaded for computers with Windows operating systems at a low cost.



Julis and other children communicating through the software.



Screenshot of the software home page.

### 3. Where is this solution being used? What company provides the networking service in your area?

Hablando con Julis is used mainly in two scenarios:

- 1) At schools or other education institutions;
- 2) At homes

Hablando con Julis' software offers a solution for people with communication difficulties to learn and communicate in both spaces.

Today, Hablando con Julis has four Technological Classrooms (Aulas Tecnológicas Hablando con Julis in Spanish) located at different Institutions for Special Education (two in Colombia and one in Panama). The classroom is a space run solely through the use of the software, whereby the children receive instructions in reading, writing, communication, and other areas of the academic syllabus. The headquarters of the organization Hablando con Julis are located in Bogotá, Colombia at the following GPS coordinates: Latitude: = 4° 18.339"; Longitude = -74° 1' 36.7942". However, the software is used in many other geographical locations, wherever people get connected (web, computer, or mobile device). The web page and the web application are enabled thanks to the services of the 04IT network, a company based in Miami, USA and Bogotá, Colombia that aims to enable technology solutions, as a service for all types of businesses, so that they may profit from the economies of scale permitted by cloud technology and a high degree of standardization of data centers, while always guaranteeing high levels of service and high-quality performance for its users.

Example of classes conducted using the software in one of the Hablando con Julis Technological Classrooms.



Children learning in the Hablando con Julis Technological Classroom.

#### **4. Describe the current and future reach of your program. How can it be scaled to reach a wider audience?**

Hablando con Julis' software is fully enabled for its use by the public, both in its web-based version and in its downloadable version. The software has 45,000 registries (words, images, signs, voices) in the Spanish version, and 25,000 in the English. There are 288 million of people with disabilities in the world, of which only 14.3% are Spanish and English speakers. As a result, the software can be adapted to fulfill the necessity of the remaining 247 million people with different capacities. Therefore, the program objective is to respond to a wider audience. The following activities could give a greater scale to the project:

- Development of communication and marketing strategy for the software as a communications and learning solution
- Adaptation of the software to better fit mobile access. The idea is to make it much more accessible in public places responding to the mobility needs of its users.
- Expanding the Hablando con Julis Technological Classrooms to other geographical locations
- Creation of other languages and specialized versions



Students learning in a Classroom in Panama City.

#### 5. If you are one of the winning entries, how will you use the award money?

In order to provide an answer to this question, we must understand the context in which the software has developed. Julis is a person with difficulties in speaking and for a long time was unable to communicate with the outer world. His father's unconditional love, led him to develop a solution to communicate with her. With the support of her family, in particular of her older sister and now president of the organization, Juli's father was able to create a technological solution that took her out of silence.



Mario Galindo, creator of the software, and his daughter Julis.

<https://soundcloud.com/audioenfrontera/hablando-con-julis-software>

Interview with Daniela Galindo, sister of Julis and President of Hablando con Julis.

Hablando con Julis' software aims to reach the greatest possible number of people in need. This solution, born from a personal heart-felt pain, is now at the service of many families that have gone through a similar sense of loss caused by the impossibility of communication. Today, Hablando con Julis' software wants to provide a voice to those in need to be listened. It would be a great honor to be the one the winner of this prize. Resources would allow Hablando con Julis to have provide greater access to the software. The organization would implement strategies to expand and promote the access to its technological solution including the

establishment of strategic alliances with both private and public stakeholders in Latin America and the expansion of the training and customer service program for selected users, families and institutions. General guidelines should result of the implementation of these strategies offering all users with adapted information depending of the user needs. The communication and learning processes would benefit in effectiveness and efficiency. The strategy also includes a social media outreach by improving the organization existing tools like Facebook [www.facebook.com/HablandoConJulis](http://www.facebook.com/HablandoConJulis) and Twitter <https://twitter.com/FundacionHCJ>. In addition, we would use the exposure given by the prize to promote awareness about the needs of people with different capacities in the world and especially in Colombia. Give To Colombia will support Hablando con Julis in the proper allocation of these funds derived from the Prize and will channel 100% to the funds to the organization if the prize is awarded. Give To Colombia will support Hablando con Julis to fully achieve its goals.

The project has a great success in Colombia and plans to be expanded to other countries.