

Using technology to even the playing field

THIS ISSUE



Using technology to even the playing field1

By Tony Langton

Assistive technology can create jobs and careers for persons with disabilities that may not have seemed possible. Unfortunately, all too often, there is a perception that someone with a disability would not be able to perform specific job tasks. The truth is that, in many cases, an individual with a disability or other functional limitation *would* be able to perform essential tasks—if given access to assistive technology or job accommodations.

Assistive technology needs are usually more obvious for persons with more severe disabilities, such as persons who cannot see or are unable to stand or walk. In these situations, screen readers for computers or wheelchairs to help with mobility problems are relatively easy to recognize. However, assistive technology can also assist people with disabilities that are more difficult to recognize.

TECHNOLOGY IS CRUCIAL

One of the best descriptions of what assistive technology means to persons with disabilities is explained by Mary Pat Radabaugh of the IBM Resource Center:

“For Americans without disabilities, technology makes things easier; for Americans with disabilities, technology makes things possible.”

People tend to take for granted conveniences such as remote controls for televisions, labor-saving devices such as dishwashers or washing machines, or features such as spell checkers built into word processing software. However, if you are someone with a disability, these are more than conveniences—these devices are often essential to perform daily tasks.

Assistive technology is more than equipment—it’s a problem-solving process that involves finding solutions to challenges and problems.

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS

But assistive technology is more than equipment—it’s really a problem-solving process that involves finding solutions to challenges and problems. Depending on the disability and employment need, there are often a range of possibilities from simple, little to no-cost solutions, such as rearranging where supplies and materials are located to more specialized assistive technology (AT), such as a standing wheelchair that can enable someone to work at a regular workstation in the kitchen of a large hotel.

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In fact, there are thousands of commercial AT products that offer solutions to many challenges. (Editor's note: One such source is ABLEDATA, which adds more than 1,000 assistive technology products to its database each year. Visit www.abledata.com.)

CONSIDERING TECHNOLOGY NEEDS

For assistive technology to be used effectively, it's important that it is an integral part of planning and day-to-day services. Tech Point training resources help counselors and other rehab staff get maximum benefit from use of assistive technology services. For more information on this approach, visit www.pathfinderassociates.net.

Technology needs must be considered throughout the entire rehabilitation process. Moreover, job analysis information that identifies essential job functions can help rehab professionals see where accommodations and AT can overcome barriers.

Effective use of AT involves asking the right question at the appropriate time. If a low-cost device will meet someone's needs, then it makes little sense to recommend something that is complicated and more costly. Rehabilitation staff, such as counselors, case managers, and placement specialists, will often need AT specialists to assist in this process.

The key is to determine what the appropriate solutions are and to work closely with the technology team and the person with a disability so that he/she is involved in important decisions.

IMPLEMENTING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

Assistive technology services can be added to rehabilitation programs and organizations as a separate service—or as a component within existing services, such as vocational evaluation or job placement. Many rehab organizations become interested in AT when staff members recognize how it can enhance the effectiveness of other services.

The idea of “placing” someone with a disability with an employer that may have a job opening is outdated.

Each state has vocational rehab programs and projects under the Assistive Technology Act that are good sources of information. To find out more, visit www.ata.org/ata/projects.php.

Moreover, CARE, the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities, maintains standards for assistive technology services and information that is also helpful. Visit www.carf.org.

However, there is no one best model or approach as to how assistive technology could be added to a rehab program or organization. There are strengths and limitations with any of the common approaches used. Internal AT specialist positions could be created—or services could be contracted from external resources. A combination of internal and external resources is often used. Yet another option is to train rehabilitation counselors to become technology resource specialists.

Any approach will require awareness training about assistive technology for *all* staff that delivers services. The rehabilitation counselor or case manager is usually the key point person. This individual is often the one who must recognize potential AT needs and understand where to go for additional information or assistance.



There are many issues that should be addressed in designing how AT services could be integrated in a rehabilitation program or organization. Therefore, it's important that, whatever approach is used, it be examined carefully and adapted to meet unique needs and resources.

One staff member will often lead efforts initially, but it's critical that the use and consideration of assistive technology become part of the organization's strategic planning. Integrating effective AT requires the involvement and support of program

coordinators and administrators. This will help ensure that necessary resources are made available and that guidelines and policy questions are addressed.



COLLABORATION AND PARTNERING

Rehabilitation services usually work best when collaboration and partnering takes place. Assistive technology services, in particular, are most effective when rehab programs and organizations work together to share resources and services. Few have the staff or financial resources to deliver all of the necessary services. Even large programs frequently share resources or make referrals to other providers.

Partnering with employers to better understand their problems and needs is another good way to achieve successful employment outcomes for persons with disabilities. Effective AT and accommodations have win-win benefits for everyone. This is a real advantage that rehabilitation professionals can bring to the negotiating table when working with employers.

The idea of “placing” someone with a disability with an employer that may have a job opening is outdated. This approach is gradually being replaced with long-term relationships in which rehab programs and organizations may provide training to develop the specialized skills that employees may need; offer employee assistance support; and make available resources such as disability awareness training, assistance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) questions, and ergonomic and rehabilitation expertise.

This strategy is crucial because most employers know little about assistive technology and often have many misconceptions about the cost and feasibility of how to accommodate workers who are disabled or become injured on the job.

Someday, universally designed tools and fully accessible workplaces may eliminate much of the need for assistive technology.

LOOKING AHEAD

Assistive technology resources and services have been available to rehab programs and organizations for many years. Some make extensive use of AT, while others have not. But for someone with a disability who could benefit from assistive technology or an

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accommodation strategy, the availability of AT services could be the factor that allows an individual to be successful in the workplace.

Someday, universally designed tools and fully accessible workplaces may eliminate much of the need for assistive technology that so many people with disabilities now depend on to find and maintain employment.

But until that happens, it's essential that rehabilitation professionals, such as counselors and case managers, vocational evaluators, and placement specialists, consider how job accommodations and AT could improve performance and enhance an individual's employability. In fact, one indicator of quality rehab programs and organizations should be whether they provide or have immediate access to AT services.

Tony Langton is a key principal with Pathfinder Associates, which specializes in training, consultation, and technical assistance services that fit unique needs. Tony has been involved in rehabilitation services for over 37 years. For the past 23 years, he has specialized in working with rehab programs and agencies with applications of assistive technology and staff development and training. For more information, contact him at tony@pathfinderassociates.net. This article is based on a presentation Tony made at the CARF Employment and Community Services International Conference, held in 2008 in Tucson, Arizona.

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