

## **Assistive Technology for Employment**

Everyone in the workplace has one thing in common; they are all working and doing so with the help of technology. Today's progressive companies large and small know that tapping into the power of technology is simply smart business. Technology can give them a competitive edge as they retain their most valuable employees and recruit the most talented people. The type of technology used to help individuals with a disability complete a task is called assistive technology.

The types of assistive technology available to improve people's performance are as unlimited as the imagination. Consider for example:

- A keyboard made for individuals with carpal tunnel syndrome. The keyboard is in 3 parts – uses a vertical instead of a horizontal format and is much healthier for the hands and wrists.
- Screen reading software reads aloud everything on the screen, including toolbars and pull down menus; allowing a person with limited or no vision to navigate a computer.
- We've all experienced back or neck discomfort from time to time. Alternative chairs & adjustable tables or the use of track pads or track balls can often ease the pain.
- People with very poor vision can use a closed circuit television (CCTV) that utilizes a magnifier and a camera to assist reading of printed materials.
- There are also devices for someone who might have unclear speech. Some of these have synthesized speech, others feature digitized speech.
- Hearing loss doesn't have to be an obstacle thanks to the availability of a number of personal amplifiers.
- Most of us have a phone that sits on our work desk that has both speakerphone capabilities and speed dial, a convenience. For someone with a motor impairment, speed dial is assistive technology because it eliminates the holding of the headset and punching a lot of numbers.

Today's businesses face an increasingly tight job market. One in which it is often difficult to find qualified and dedicated employees. That's why it makes good business sense to retain valued employees as they grow older or become disabled.

### ***AT & Employment Myths***

A number of myths have been perpetuated over the years, regarding assistive technology and hiring employees with disabilities. One such myth is that AT is expensive. According to the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), a typical one-time accommodation costs less than \$500 and many accommodations cost little or nothing at all. Even if the cost is higher in a particular case, it may often be shared with a state agency or other resource

Another misconception is that employees with disabilities are somehow inferior in the area of job performance. On the contrary, studies have shown that employees with disabilities score as high as or higher than other employees in terms of safety, performance of duty, attendance, and job stability.

### ***Real Life Examples:***

Forward looking companies, wishing to tap into the power of assistive technology to retain and recruit the best employees must begin by understanding that there are assistive technology options. Today's students leaving high school may already have the experiences with assistive technology to ensure job success. Human resource staff should be aware that even though a limitation exists an individual could do the job with the help of AT. For example:

- a secretary with the use of only one arm, uses a mini keyboard to produce paperwork;
- a computer programmer with blindness uses a screen reader to assist in computer operation;
- a factory worker with hearing loss attends a required safety training and uses a personal amplifier to hear the video tape; and
- a drill press operator returns to work after experiencing a back injury with modifications to the press platform.

These are just a few examples of real life AT options in use today. Examples can be found in every industry. For every disability, there is some form of AT to allow continued employment. No one is immune to acquiring a disability.

### ***Funding***

There are federally funded vocational rehabilitation programs in each state and territory. If you meet state specific eligibility requirements, you may qualify for assistive technology devices and services that will help you to become gainfully employed. If you qualify for vocational rehabilitation services in your state, you and your vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor will develop an Individual Employment Plan (IPE) that will state your employment goals and how they are to be achieved, which can include assistive technology.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requires employers with 15 or more employees to make reasonable accommodations in the workplace for qualified employees with disabilities. Assistive technology can be one element of meeting this requirement. In most cases, it is the employer's responsibility to

provide on-site job accommodations for an employee. However, the employee is responsible for providing personal accommodations such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, and personal attendants. Accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis and may not be required when it results in an undue hardship to the employer.

**Next Steps:**

Using assistive technology can make work possible. A simple first step is to contact **DC Assistive Technology Program**.

Visit [www.atpdc.org](http://www.atpdc.org) or

Call **1-202-547-0198 (voice), 202-547-2657 (TTY), 202-547-2662 (Fax)**

The 56 statewide Assistive Technology (AT) Programs form a national network of statewide assistive technology (AT) programs. Information contained in this brochure represents the accumulation of knowledge of this national network. The AT programs receive funding from the US Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to implement the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, as amended. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred. In District of Columbia, this program is known as **Assistive Technology Program for District of Columbia**.

Alternative formats available upon request by contacting at **202-547-0198 (voice), 202-547-2657 (TTY), 202-547-2662 (Fax)**.