

How AT Can Help You in the Workplace

The concept of using technology in the workplace is not a new one. Whether we are in a white collar or blue collar profession or somewhere in-between, most of us use some kind of technology for work – computers, phones, fax machines, copiers or machinery and hand tools. Technology helps us get things done faster, easier and more efficiently. However, technology provides another benefit – it facilitates equity among employees. Some employees with disabilities or limitations rely on assistive technology (AT) to allow them to perform their job tasks to achieve the same results as other employees. They just perform their tasks differently with the assistance of their AT.

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) defines AT as “any item, piece of equipment or product system that is used to increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.” In the workplace, AT can range from



ergonomic keyboards

that minimize hand strain to computer screen readers for employees who are blind or have low vision to tractors designed with hand-controls to assist farmers with lower extremity limitations due to neurological conditions and spinal cord injury.

Commonly Used Workplace AT

There are many types of AT that can assist you. Even things you normally may not think about, like screen clips to hold paper in place when you type, decrease neck strain. Or, if you are on the phone frequently, a microphone headset allows you to hold your head in a normal, upright position to reduce shoulder discomfort.

When thinking about what type of AT you may need, it may be helpful to be aware of commonly used workplace AT.

Ergonomic or Adapted Keyboards, Keypads and Handgrips

Ergonomic keyboards refer to a computer keyboard designed to minimize muscle strain and discomfort. The hands, wrists, shoulders and the back are some of the parts of the body, which are most susceptible to repetitive strain injury.

Adapted keyboards, keypads and handgrips are a different style of keyboard, keypad and handgrip that are often designed for individuals with special typing needs. For example, there are keyboards designed to be used with only one hand and mice that don't have the standard location for clicking. These can be useful for individuals with one limb, the use of one hand, carpal tunnel syndrome or muscular degeneration.

Screen Readers

A screen reader software program for the computer identifies and interprets the screen display and then presents it to the user in text-to-speech or -Braille formats. These programs are useful for individuals who are blind or have low vision.

Screen Magnifiers or Larger Computer Screens

A screen magnifier is software that interfaces with a computer's graphical output to present enlarged screen content. This can be beneficial for users with low vision. Also, using a larger computer screen is a simple and effective method to increase the size of content that is being viewed.

AbleData team member Elizabeth uses a screen reader program. She reports that with the reader, she can “create and edit documents, conduct research online, participate in webinars, schedule meetings, and communicate with my co-workers and clients via e-mail. Simply put, [the reader] provides me with the assistance and the resources I need to perform my job duties proficiently, competently and independently.” For Elizabeth, using a screen reader is an integral part of completing her daily work.

Voice Recognition Software

Voice recognition software allows an electronic device to recognize a user's voice and commands. This allows a user to write, surf the internet or give commands without having to physically type. This can be useful for individuals who cannot use their limbs or hands, have carpal tunnel syndrome or limited muscle control.

Hand Tools with Accessible Features and Do It Yourself Devices

Most traditional hand tools such as hammers, measuring instruments, wrenches, screwdrivers, materials carriers, tire gauges and paintbrushes are available with accessible features to assist employees with varied limitations. Whether you are a carpenter with limited hand strength who needs a contoured hammer to ensure a firm, slip resistant hold; or a car mechanic who is blind or with low vision who needs a torque wrench with voice output, many products are available on the market to assist you in performing your job tasks. Additionally, there are many do-it-yourself options such as using corrugated cardboard to assist in holding nails in place when hammering.

How to Obtain Workplace AT

Once you have determined that an AT device may help you do your job, how can you work with your employer to get that device? Your employer may be worried about covering the costs of AT. A recent study conducted by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) shows that workplace accommodations not only are low cost, but also positively impact the workplace in many ways. Employers in the study noted that by providing AT accommodations they were able to increase productivity, increase morale, retain valuable employees and improve their company's diversity. This was accomplished without adding to workers compensation or training costs. It was concluded that the benefits to the employer most often outweigh the actual costs.

Under Title 1 of the Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended, if your company has more than 15 employees, your employer is required to provide reasonable accommodation, which includes AT devices, for people with disabilities. However, it is your responsibility to ask. JAN offers the following guidance to start the accommodation process at your workplace:

“First determine with whom you should discuss accommodations. You can let any member of management know that you are making a request. It is best to consider your work situation as well, so if there is a specific person that handles equipment requests, or if your human resources person or manager handles these requests, you would want to direct your request to them.”

Now you can submit your request. You can make your request face-to-face but it is often helpful to have a written copy of your request. This ensures that there is a hard copy of your request submission date. JAN provides a form that can be used for such requests here: <http://askjan.org/media/accommrequestltr.html>. Employers are supposed to respond as quickly as possible but there is no set time limit.

Explain that you are making the request to help with a disability. Be ready to explain how and why this piece of technology would help you. Be aware that there may be other accommodation options that the company may want to explore with you. Some employers may request further medical information from you, and without it they can deny your request.”

For More Information

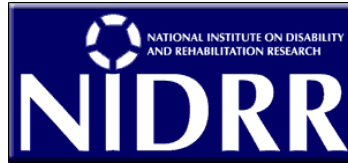
AbleData provides listings of products that may help you in the workplace. Visit our Workplace product category section at: <https://abledata.acl.gov/abledata.cfm?pageid=19327&top=14033&deep=2&trail=22&ksectionid=19327>. You may also find other category sections helpful. Visit <https://abledata.acl.gov/abledata.cfm?pageid=19327&ksectionid=19327> for a list of all of our category sections.

JAN (www.askjan.org) offers free consulting services for employers and individuals with disabilities or limitations. JAN also provides many guides to assist, as well as a database of assistive technology accommodations strategies and tools that can be searched by product name, limitation, disability or disease.

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Address: AbleData, 103 W Broad Street, Suite 400, Falls Church, Virginia 22046
Telephone: 800-227-0216 (Se habla español.)
TTY: 703-992-8313
Fax: 703-356-8314

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