



ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

BY ROBIN E. SPRINGER

Assistive Technology Benefits All, Not Just a Few

Assistive technology is improving the efficiency of daily life in myriad ways. Yet, when many people hear the term "assistive technology" they visualize someone with a disability; a wheelchair, a cane, a device that talks for one who cannot. But assistive technology comprises a much broader spectrum of products and users — *and uses* — than may be immediately apparent.

The Webster's New World Dictionary defines assist as "to help or aid." Technology is defined as "the science of the practical or industrial arts; applied science." Assistive technology, therefore, is *applied science that helps or aids others*.

Wheelchairs, walkers and products that speak for people who have affected speech fall into the category of assistive technology. But so do air conditioners and cell phones. And if you knew how the sewer system worked you would know there is assistive technology in your bathroom. In reality all of us benefit from — all of us are assisted by — assistive technology.

It has been said that "necessity is the mother of invention," and, indeed that is true many times. In fact, many high-tech products that are in widespread use by the general population today originally were designed because the disabled population demanded them.

These first-generation products historically are very expensive and often still have bugs. But they are temporarily acceptable to the disabled population because they provide a benefit to this market.

The able-bodied population may see the potential but is not willing to use these crude products immediately, preferring instead to wait for the products to evolve.

As the technology progresses, the able-bodied market begins to see the benefit of these refined products, realizing that the assistive products are easier to use because they comprise the concepts of universal design. Those without disabilities begin using the products, and as they do so costs decrease and availability increases, resulting in wide acceptance and use of what was originally labeled "assistive technology."

Industry begins using assistive technology to prevent injuries in healthy employees. It provides a safe transition into the able-bodied market, with the benefits being obvious. The products are easier to use and require less physical effort from the consumer. Businesses understand that keeping people healthy increases the bottom line. Less money is spent on insurance claims, medical coverage and sick pay. After the benefits are measured, the products may be implemented for all employees.

A perfect example is speech recognition software. In earlier product releases it was slow. It required users to pause between words. It didn't always listen. People who had other methods of computer access available to them commonly stated they saw the potential of the product but wanted to postpone their purchase until the software became user-friend-

lier. Today the technology has improved to the extent that the able-bodied market is willing to use it and is, for the most part, satisfied with the results.

Technology is headed toward making life easier. Keeping in mind that the majority of car accidents are caused from people taking their eyes off the road to change the radio station, companies now are working on integrating interactive speech-recognition into automobiles.

In the future we may be able to request a radio station by voice and we will hear confirmation that the car heard us correctly so we can keep our eyes on the road. We are beginning to use cell phones interactively by voice. The possibilities are infinite.

This technology broadens our lifestyles and makes us more efficient. Increasing our capabilities, it invites us into arenas we may not ordinarily have entered, had it not been so easy to get there.

Future topics in this column will include information on people and products. It will discuss how people, with and without disabilities, utilize the technology, and it will discuss the technology itself. In this way, it is my hope that we will dispel the myths that assistive technology is only for people with disabilities and that the able-bodied market has no use for and does not use assistive technology.

Maybe someday assistive technology can be so broad in its meaning that we would be just as accurate describing it as "Really Useful Stuff."

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