

Where is I.T. A.T.?

Technology should help us not confuse us. New technologies appear every day and it is easy to get lost in all the terminology and devices. Is it a boon or a curse? Kai Jones, Information Officer with Learning Disability Wales, sheds some light on the subject.

The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler defines technology as "the pursuit of life by means other than life". In other words 'technology' is the relationship that society has with its tools and crafts, and the extent to which that relationship enables society to control its environment. Yet this relationship can have the opposite effect from that of enabling control for people with a disability. A key concept of the social model of disability is that society disables people, technology that society develops can also be disabling, yet, as this article demonstrates, with the right foresight of manufacturers and users, it can also be enabling.



Possum's 'Primo' remote controller controls the immediate environment

Barriers

We've all had problems programming a video recorder or setting up a new computer. New washing machines come with displays that look more like the flight deck of the Death Star than something that is just intended to wash your smalls. Meanwhile, the very manuals that are supposed to ease you into the use of these products are getting so big and complex you're inclined to check whether they say 'How to fly a Stealth Bomber' on the cover. It's easy to understand then that technology can form barriers for all of us, but for many people with a disability it's the tools we take for granted in everyday life – like phones, computers, showers, even doors – that can have the most disabling effect. If everyday

tasks limit a person's independence it can have a knock-on effect for every aspect of their lives - from education, hygiene and leisure, to their ability to achieve employment.

Increased use

'Assistive technology' or A.T. is increasingly being used to provide the solutions for these issues. A general term that includes assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices, assistive technology can be used to describe any product or service that enables, maintains or increases independence for individuals with disabilities.

At one end of the spectrum that includes everyday low-tech items, for instance, gadgets that give voice prompts to do things such

Possum's 'Lite' and 'Mini' environmental controllers



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as reminders to shut the fridge door or phones that use pictures rather than numbers on a speed dial keypad.

More hi-tech items include sensors that give you alerts to potentially dangerous situations such as leaving the gas on after cooking, or GPS (Global Positioning System), used to increase security and make sure you know where you are.

Some assistive technology can be simply applied, such as the disco shower that HFT installed for a service user who hated showering. HFT helped the individual by using a person-centred approach to discover what might make the experience more comfortable. Knowing he was a big fan of music, a sensor - which was connected to an iPod and disco lights – was attached to the shower basin. When the shower was turned on the water hit the sensor, which set off the music and lights. HFT now report the

only problem is getting him out of the shower.

Person Centred

HFT insist that this person-centred approach to assistive technology is crucial in its application, therefore preferring to call it Personalised Technology (PT), "because ultimately it's not about the science, it's the way you use the technology to enhance your everyday life that really counts." Other organisations use a similar term, Person Centred Technology.

While it is possible to create innovative solutions to existing products, the key question is why don't these products come with these very tools built in? How many of us have left a tap running, to come back with the sight of a flooded floor and an expensive repair bill? Wouldn't a gadget that cuts off the water at a set limit be beneficial for all of us? As Steve Barnard from HFT says, "I was speaking to a

service provider who was eager to get hold of a washing machine that had a simple, easy-to-use display panel. I said, 'can I have one as well please?'"

Report

Technology is often created without regard to people with disabilities, creating unnecessary barriers and forcing people with a disability to either put up with it or find a way to adapt it. A recent report from the communications watchdog Ofcom identified a lack of leadership from the top and of a proactive approach to inclusive design, as fundamental reasons behind the barriers to the development of communications equipment, products and services for disabled people.

The report cited Ofcom's duty to encourage the availability of easily usable apparatus under Section 10 of the Communications Act 2003. It specifically pointed to the lack

of cooperation between the industry and groups that represent disabled people, the need to share knowledge about the needs of disabled people and the marketing of accessible products and services as an ethical choice.

Mike Whitlam, chairman of the Advisory Committee on Older and Disabled People said the report offered the players in the supply chain an opportunity to learn from these findings. "We understand that there are commercial pressures, particularly in the current economic climate, but with an ageing population and many of us developing an impairment at some point in our lives there are also market opportunities and commercial prizes for firms that get it right."

Europe

This blunt recognition of the potential profit that industry can make by driving forward new assistive technologies and services is something understood by a new European-wide project. Working across seven countries, ImPaCT in Europe is aiming to demonstrate how assistive technology and ICT can significantly support independence for people with disabilities and their parents. Jim Crowe, Director of Learning Disability Wales, one of the project partners, places emphasis on the need for a diverse group of stakeholders

to come together to ensure people with a disability benefit from technology.

"With ImPaCT in Europe we are evaluating and promoting the benefits of person centred technology for people with disabilities, but we can only do that with the cooperation of business. By working with companies like Tunstall and Possum, who are respected leaders in their industry, we are aiming to address issues such as standardisation and universal design. Our key aim is to bring all the stakeholders together, including users, carers, policy makers, purchasers, providers and manufacturers."

Enabling participation

Community Lives Consortium, based in Swansea, are testament to the benefits of working across the board, from local authorities and business in enabling their service users to fully participate in decision making via the exploration and implementation of technology.

In 2006 Community Lives Consortium, in partnership with the City and County of Swansea, the Swansea Learning Disability Provider Forum and the web development company CDSM, set up People and Places. A social networking website for people with a learning disability, People and Places is a portal and online portfolio that promotes communication, interaction and evidence collection

amongst its community members.

The website works by promoting and enabling community members to create a comprehensive portrait of who they are, what skills and knowledge they have and provides tools to manage and help them attain what they want to do with their life. It brings together all of the people who are important to a community member including family, friends, support workers and other professionals involved in their lives. For Peter Russell from Community Lives, it is a crucial and exciting way of using new media to empower people.

"It takes person centred planning to a whole new level," enthuses Peter, "from being what their aspirations are and who they are to what is actually happening in their lives on a daily basis. They use all the tools that are familiar to all of us, such as video, audio and headsets with microphones - which gamers use with their Xbox - and use them to interact with other people from their local authority.



Possum's 'Vivo' domestic controller

"For too long people with learning disabilities have been talked about and described and had reports filed away about them in drawers that they never see. People and Places puts the tools directly in their hands and lets them record their lives, explore and talk about what they want to do."

People and Places has proved so success that it is being rolled out to other local authorities throughout the UK, with a universal platform planned so users can talk to people in other areas of the country.

Enabling independence

In addition to exploring the benefits of ICT (Information Communication Technology), Community Lives Consortium has also implemented a range of assistive technology solutions in tenants' homes, enabling improved independence, safety and participation.

"We've now come to a stage where we have a good level of multimedia skills, like video and audio, that we can use it effectively across a range of services, such as recruitment," says Peter. "This then helps people with a learning disability take a more meaningful role in recruitment.

"Soon anyone who comes to work for us we will be asked to make a 30 second video of who they are as part of the recruitment process. That video will then stay with them once they are here. Prior to this if a

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new member of staff had to go and visit a tenant there would have to be a new level of trust built up. Now we will be able to send a link to the video and say, 'you won't have met Paul before but here he is introducing himself and saying a few things about him'.

"Technology is starting to influence all areas of support now and before long it's going to be mainstream," continues Peter. "We've almost reached a critical mass with it. Whereas originally people we're very suspicious and didn't trust technology now the tide has turned and we are being inundated with requests for assessments."

Obstacles

Lack of trust and suspicion is one of the biggest obstacles to overcome in exploring the use of assistive technology. Paid carers may worry about the threat to their jobs where as a supporter of the use of technology will argue that, implemented in the correct way, technology can support their work. Families and carers will no doubt be concerned about the danger of technology having the opposite effect of independence and empowerment and trapping people in their homes. There is still a strong debate to be had over the ethics of the transfer of control from staff, or from the person themselves to a technological system.



These thoughts are echoed by Steve Barnard who states there has been much worthy progress but assistive technology will only truly come into its own when it is entirely user-led.

Keeping up to date

Following the recent European project TATE (Through Assisted Technology to Employment), the Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities and HFT have produced a Guide to Implementing Assistive Technology for People with Learning Disabilities, which includes an informative chapter assessing the ethical approach to delivering AT. Whilst arguing the case for assistive technology it warns that "significant thought is needed in [the] implementation to ensure safeguards remain adequate in the new situation and that any installation is ethical."

There are far too many tools and systems of assistive technology to be listed here, however you can keep up-to-date with progress and debate via two excellent magazines, Ability (John Lamb Media) and the Journal for Assistive Technology (Pavilion). John Lamb, editor of Ability Magazine and an expert on AT for over thirty years, describes the advance of technology as positive, yet still lacking in coherence

between that diverse audience.

"When I first began writing about assistive technology in the seventies ideas such as voice recognition, braille displays and environmental controls were still in the laboratory. Now these technologies are widely available; a massive leap forward. The need to make IT accessible is more appreciated too but there is still a big lag between mainstream advances and what is available to disabled people.

"The challenge now is to eliminate that gap by ensuring that electronic devices are designed for everyone at the outset. It doesn't have to be expensive, but it does require the political and commercial will to make it happen."

User led

These thoughts are echoed by Steve Barnard who states there has been much worthy progress but assistive technology will only truly come into its own when it is entirely user-led.

"The impact of assistive technologies redefined as

personalised technology - which includes telecare, environmental controls, low and high tech devices - is increasingly proving to be extremely beneficial to people with learning disabilities and their carers," says Steve. "These benefits can be found in employment, independence, mobility, education, communication and safety. However, these benefits are all anecdotal and there is still a great need to provide evidence in a way that will encourage policy makers, commissioners, service providers and training providers to understand these benefits in quality of life and cost benefits.

"It is only when it is taken on board by these groups that there will be some clarity in funding streams and how technology fits into the personalisation agenda. The market still appears to be led by manufacturers and although many of these are principled in their intentions, it should be driven by individuals."

*Kai Jones
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