
Assistive Technology Enables Employees

By

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In today's competitive marketplace, skilled employees are a precious asset. The Department of Defense (DoD) is constantly searching for talented personnel. DoD has found that people with disabilities, who have the right accommodations, are a vital part of the defense team.

DoD has a long-standing commitment to providing equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program (CAP) was established in 1990 to bring down barriers faced by employees with disabilities. DoD programmed \$10.7 million for CAP through 1994, and additional funds have been programmed to support the program through 1999. The Defense Medical Information Management (DMIM) Office serves as the executive agent for CAP.

DoD's goal is to increase the representation of individuals with disabilities to two percent of its civilian work force. DoD encourages recruiting, hiring, and promoting people with disabilities by providing adaptive office equipment to DoD employees with disabilities. With the right accommodations, people with disabilities have the power to excel. Using adaptive equipment, employees may be able to perform additional assignments or perform current tasks more efficiently. Assistive devices may complement the skills and abilities of employees, improving their opportunities for advancement and increasing their job satisfaction.

By providing accommodations, CAP assists DoD activities in complying with Public Laws 99-506 and 100-542, which require computer and telecommunications systems be accessible. For employees with disabilities and their supervisors, selecting accommodations can be challenging. It is important to recognize that individuals with disabilities have different capabilities and varying degrees of disabling conditions. Choosing appropriate accommodations is best done on a case-by-case basis.

For individuals who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, there are many products available to facilitate communication. Teletypewriters (TTYs) transmit printed messages across telephone lines, and may include printers, answering machines, and speech output. Personal amplification systems transmit sound via a radio carrier wave, and are useful for group situations. Telephone amplifiers make communication easier, and visual alerting systems are available for use as a smoke/fire detector or to indicate the phone is ringing.

For individuals who are visually impaired, closed circuit television systems (CCTVs) are designed to magnify printed material electronically, and some systems may be linked with the computer. There are also large screen monitors and software packages to increase the size of print on the screen to enable people with vision loss to continue using a standard computer. Some individuals access DOS and/or Windows applications by using screen readers with a speech synthesizer, and a significant addition to assistive technology is the optical character reader which scans printed material and converts it to a machine-readable format.

Devices that enable people with speech impairments to communicate are referred to as augmentative communication devices. Speech synthesizers are artificial voices and may be built into a communications board or part of a computer system. Facsimile (fax) machines facilitate telephone communication for people who are non-vocal, although they permit only

one-way communication. It should also be noted that verbal communication is unnecessary with electronic mail.

Individuals whose conditions limit their mobility or who have experienced injuries from repetitive motion may benefit from alternative methods of entering computer data. Speech recognition systems allow entry of text and data by simply talking into a microphone, and there is a growing number of available alternative keyboards and mice input devices. In addition, the number of keystroke entries can be reduced by use of word prediction expansion software.

Another service of CAP is supporting long-term training (two days or more) for individuals with disabilities. Although it is the responsibility of the requester to arrange services, CAP will cover the costs of sign language interpreters for individuals with hearing impairments, readers for individuals with visual impairments, and personal assistants for individuals with mobility impairments. CAP also covers costs of training to help employees with disabilities learn to use adaptive equipment for access to computer and telecommunication systems.

CAP has a Technology Evaluation Center (CAPTEC) which contains several computer workstations equipped with a wide variety of equipment designed to accommodate persons with disabilities. People seeking solutions to access problems can visit CAPTEC to see the type of equipment that is available, compare different solutions, and ensure that adaptive equipment will be compatible with their current automated environment. Because of the central Pentagon location and the variety of equipment available, CAPTEC simplifies choosing accommodations. To schedule a visit, call (703) 691-8812 (Voice/TTY).

In 1991, the upper management at the Materiel Systems Group (MSG) at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base (WPAFB) initiated a small-budget effort to provide local service to accommodate their employees with disabilities. They recognized that selecting accommodations can be complex and implemented services for on-site assessment of needs and assistance with procuring adaptive equipment. These services have expanded beyond organizational delineation, and all employees at WPAFB can now benefit from the MSG Computer Accommodations Program (CAP).

The uniqueness of the program brings information of national resources, including bulletin board services, to a local level. The MSG CAP office has information on vendors and manufacturers of assistive technology products, as well as publications, and information on referral resources and the laws and regulations covering disability/injury topics. Employees at WPAFB have an opportunity to see different types of adaptive equipment that is available at the demonstration/evaluation station, and MSG CAP also loans the equipment if an employee desires to perform a more extensive evaluation at their own work station.

MSG CAP joins efforts with other base, local, state, and national organizations to raise awareness of and to promote the resolution of disability and ergonomic issues. Among other activities, the program considers information dissemination very important. In addition to a quarterly publication and special interest group meetings on a wide variety of topics, MSG CAP has recently posted its core information on the World Wide Web (<http://www.afmc.wpafb.af.mil:12000/organizations/MSG/projects/CAP/>).

For more information about DoD CAP, call (703) 681-8811 (Voice/TTY) or access <http://www.ha.osd.mil>. For more information about MSG CAP, call (513) 257-3499 or e-mail =CAP@wpgatel.wpafb.af.mil.