

Using Speech

Technology Offers Greater Opportunity in the Workplace

by Robin Springer

Carol was struck with polio when she was five years old. A quadriplegic, she had to fight to get an education, and actually wrote President Kennedy a letter, telling him he could pay for her schooling now or he could pay for her disability forever.

Even after earning a master's degree in Social Work, Carol, a mother of two who holds a prestigious job in a government agency, remembers that people were skeptical she would be able to work. More than 20 years later, not only is she working, she is helping others to do the same.

Overseeing training programs and compliance at her organization, Carol's career involves assisting employees with regard to reasonable accommodations, civil rights issues and the Americans With Disabilities Act, among other laws. She supervises programs to help her employer and employees understand the consequences of non-compliance with the laws.

Carol uses some technology at the office. She was able to work before having access to technology so she does not think it has afforded her more opportunity in the workplace. But she does believe technology is opening doors for those entering the working world.

"Today people do not have the ability to say, 'you can't' as much (as they could in the past) because there is so much you can do with technology," says Carol.

She uses the example that she cannot be a ballerina. "That's reality," she says. "But today, if you are disabled and you want to dance, you could do choreography using a computer."

In her own life, Carol looks at technology as an energy-saving device, allowing her to work longer with more ease and to get more done in a shorter period of time. As she ages, she gets tired more quickly and she finds the technology helps minimize the fatigue.

Carol's typical workday begins by reading newspapers online (she is unable to read a hard copy unassisted). She uses speech-recognition for a significant number of tasks, including corresponding via e-mail and traditional mail, editing documents and dictating telephone and meeting notes.

Remembering the first time she used speech recognition, she recalls, "I sounded like a Russian spy," and she wondered if the technology would ever be viable. Using more recent versions of speech recognition, however, "changed the world" for her. She now can write five and seven page reports with "no problem."

Carol uses a desktop microphone with the software because it allows her more independence. She marvels when she reflects on the difference between writing a 2000 word report with speech recognition versus a mouthstick.

One of the biggest issues Carol faces while facilitating compliance is that not enough is done to let others know what is available. While technology allows people to do more, it is useless unless individuals know what exists and how it can be implemented.

She gives the example of an employee who began having vision problems. The only accommodation this employee needed was an enlarged computer screen. Apparently, no one

was aware the technology existed to enable this person to continue working. Had Carol not had a friend with similar needs who used the same type of technology this employee needed, the employee would have been out of work.

We still have a long way to go when it comes to increasing awareness. The good news is that, compared to other countries, we have experienced much more progress with regard to equal rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Unlike places including the Soviet Union, Brazil, and Italy, we have curb cuts and wheelchair ramps on many sidewalks and in many streets. It is illegal to tell people they will not be hired because they have a disability. And able-bodied employees cannot openly get paid more than their disabled counterparts to do the same job.

Only with awareness can we continue to bridge the gap between the "front office image" and mainstreaming people with disabilities into society so people with and without disabilities, who may appear different on the surface, can understand each other and learn about each other. In this way we can appreciate our similarities instead of focusing on our differences.



Robin E. Springer is president of Computer Talk, a consulting firm specializing in the design and implementation of speech recognition and other hands-free technology services. She can be reached at (888) 999-9161 or by e-mail at info@comptalk.com.