

Using Speech



Improved Education Could Increase Technology Use

by Robin Springer

In Russia, children with disabilities can be denied an education. In America, we have IDEA. In Brazil, it is acceptable to deny employment to a person with a disability, specifically because he or she is disabled. In the United States we have the Ticket to Work program. In Italy, there are buildings with steps, but no wheelchair ramps. In the United States, we have the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Little more than a year ago, "Losing It," a documentary that examines the experiences of people with disabilities around the world, was released. Sharon Greytak, the New York resident who conceived of and directed, "Losing It," did so because she wanted to know if people in other countries had similar experiences to her own.

Greytak introduces viewers to six people in five countries. In Russia, Hong Kong, Brazil and Italy, the assistive technology presented was comprised of crutches, an old wheelchair and a wheelchair ramp. In the United States, the technology consisted of a mouthstick and speech-recognition software that had not been upgraded in at least two years.

While the documentary in no way was a scientific study on how people with disabilities are treated, it allows us a glimpse into how these people with disabilities see themselves and how they are perceived by others. The lack of equality and accessibility in these countries is accepted as a way of life. As one of the people with whom Greytak visited said, "This is the way things are."

In the United States, we do not accept dis-

crimination as inevitable and have made strides to assist the more than 52 million Americans¹ with disabilities by passing legislation like the ADA and the Tech Act. Why, then, are there so many people not getting the technology that will enable them to succeed in school, in the workplace, and in everyday life?

In my practice, I often meet with people who become overwhelmed with emotion when they are able to see how assistive technology will help them. I also talk with counselors and therapists who are unaware that appropriate technology exists for their clients.

These experiences are echoed by others in the industry.

Rod McMichael, director of marketing distribution at the Prentke Romich Company (a manufacturer of assistive devices, including augmentative communication devices for people with severe disabilities) is always surprised have never heard of PRC, a company that has been in existence for 35 years.

McMichael believes that knowledge, or lack thereof, is the biggest factor preventing people from getting the technology that will best help them.

Silvio Cianfrone, president of Nanopac has had similar experiences of people needing technology and not knowing where to find it, or if it exists at all. "They come through our doors and ask, 'Where have you been?'," He tells them Nanopac has been in the same building for 14 years.

One of the problems seems to be that people are not aware of the technology. They know

there must be something out there that can help them, but they do not know what it is or where to find it. And if there is something available the presumption is that the technology is beyond their reach.

Occupational therapists, physical therapists, orthopedists, counselors and augmentative communication specialists do not always have the knowledge or the resources to provide information to clients about assistive technology.

While conferences on assistive technology are a valuable resource in finding them, one manufacturer, pointing out that conferences attract the same crowd every year, likens these gatherings to Old Home Week. Going to these conventions, one can expect to find the same manufacturers displaying the new versions of their products. The booths are in the same location each year and the people staffing the booths are the same. Even the visitors walking the floor have familiar faces and name badges. These counselors, doctors and therapists already know about the technology and the clientele who will most benefit from them. What is missing from the equation are the people who do not know what is out there.

One vendor, stating that the conferences are targeting the wrong market says, "There is too much technology and not enough publicity."

¹ As per Census Bureau 1997 information, there are 52.6 million Americans 15-64 years old who are classified as disabled



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