

Adding Ability to People's Lives



Jack Mitchell, rehabilitation engineer, demonstrates a head mouse, a device that is useful for upper-extremity amputees who can't operate a traditional computer mouse.

The Alliance for Technology Access (ATA) was conceived in 1983 by a group of parents and professionals in Northern California in response to the needs of a 5-year-old child with cerebral palsy whom it was believed would benefit from adaptive technology. In 1986, the group was joined by a major technology company to form the ATA with 11 charter member resource centers in 10 states. In 1989, ATA was established as an independent nonprofit organization.



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Technology
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The Alliance for Technology Access

by Nancy Carroll

At some point in your life, you, or someone you are close to, may have a severe accident, have a child with a birth defect, or contract a disease that leads to great changes in lifestyle. It's nice to know that organizations such as the Alliance for Technology Access are there – if you ever need them.

Today, the ATA is a nationwide network of 38 community-based, consumer-driven technology resource centers. Working with 80 technology vendors and a growing number of individuals and community-based organizations, ATA is dedicated to connecting people with disabilities of all ages to technology tools that can empower them as individuals and open new worlds of opportunity.

The generosity of vendors nationwide enables ATA to continue its important work, notes Mary Lester, national executive director of ATA. "Our vendors provide a variety of levels of support," she says, "whether it's sending us preview copies of software at no charge, giving us hefty discounts, setting up loaner banks of their products, or sending representatives to our resource centers to conduct workshops. Without this support, there's no way we could accomplish our mission."

The ACA visited the East Tennessee ATA Resource Center

to tour the facility and see firsthand the services they provide to people with disabilities in our region. ATA Center personnel are all experts in the use of conventional and assistive technology and assist family members, educators, employers, and legislators, as well as children and adults with disabilities, to explore computers, telecommunication systems, and other adaptive devices that will help them achieve their goals.

Each ATA Center offers a wide range



Don Sobczak, technical support specialist, modifies toys for children.

of services and programs to meet the unique needs of its own community. At the Center in Knoxville, there are adaptive toys for children who cannot use their hands, an adaptive kitchen with cabinets and switches at lower levels for people in wheelchairs, mirrors positioned for maximum vision, chair lifts, and customized computers and keyboards – every technology imaginable to make life easier for people with disabilities.

What is Assistive Technology?

Technology has transformed the way we do business, the way we learn, the way we enjoy our leisure time and the way we live. Assistive technology is an item, piece of equipment or product used to maintain and/or improve the functional capabilities of individuals who have disabilities. It is a “tool” used to promote self-reliance, productivity, and participation in the community.

Assistive technology can help people learn, communicate, play or achieve greater mobility and independence. Assistive technology can provide a variety of functions from helping someone communicate to controlling the heating and cooling in his or her home.

Evaluation

One of the key services offered at ATA Centers is a consultation to help people evaluate what technology is going to work for them and assist them in achieving their goals. Central to the process is a presentation and hands-on trial of assistive technology options to help consumers make informed choices. Those who live with, work with, and educate consumers are encouraged to participate in the evaluation process.

Employee Service

The ATA Center staff work with school systems personnel, members of the household and/or employers to help create a more productive environment for the consumer. ATA can provide assistance to human resources departments in recruiting, training, and equipping employees with disabilities. Staff expertise includes: new hires, the returning disabled worker, job analysis, worksite accommodation and employment and disability laws and regulations. Many of the 38 centers across the country have experience working with vocational rehabilitation officials and can reach out to talented people with disabilities who are looking for jobs.

Funding

Staff members help advise those in need of the financial resources necessary to buy assistive technology services and devices. Support is offered to individuals in self-advocacy efforts to obtain funding. ATA is supported by foundations, corporations, donated services, individual contributions, contracted services, book income and miscellaneous revenues. ■

For more information about ATA and its Centers, and how you can get involved, e-mail ATAinfo@ATAccess.org or visit the ATA Web site: www.ATAccess.org