Computer AT: Opportunity Knocks for OTAs Working in Schools

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For many persons with disabilities, computer technology has brought about amazing access to information, education, and services. However others have been overlooked, due to inequitable systems, insufficient resources, and unknowledgeable practitioners.

The Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988 describes assistive technology (AT) as "any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired off the shelf, modified, or customized that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities."[1] It describes assistive technology service as "any service that directly assists an individual with a disability in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device." According to Ochoa, Vasquez, and Gerber "as technology has become more 'intelligent,' with a far greater potential for adaptation to individual differences, it also has become more complex for students to learn and for teachers to integrate with instruction" (p. 251).[2]

The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)[3] requires that AT be considered for *all* students receiving special education services. With such a mandate, the need for qualified AT personnel is increasingly evident as schools strive to meet their obligations. Yet 41% of special educators have reported that they received no AT training.[4]

The IDEA Amendments do not specify who should provide AT services. Given their academic training in disabilities, AT, and compensatory approaches, occupational therapy

practitioners, including occupational therapy assistants (OTAs) with advanced expertise in information technology, could be ideal candidates to fill this role.

The following are ways for OTAs with an interest in AT to learn more about this area of practice:

- Taking courses in computers can count toward National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy professional development if they relate to your job. Check with your local school districts or community colleges for adult education courses related to operating computers. This is just a start. You will also need to take courses or workshops in AT. Check with AOTA or your state occupational therapy association for workshops. Distance education courses are another option. The Research Institute for Assistive and Training Technologies (www.nasdse.com) lists a number of institutions that offer short-term and credit-bearing courses in AT.

- Develop a list of Internet resources. One of my favorite Web sites, the Assistive Technology Training Online Project (www.atto.buffalo.edu), offers easy-to-understand AT tutorials and related resources.

- Join a listserv related to AT. For example, AOTA hosts the Special Interest Section Technology listserv. AOTA members can easily participate by going to www.aota.org and clicking on Listservs.

- Try out AT on your own computer. Many companies offer free trial downloads, which allow you to use their products for a specified period. A couple of AT product trial versions are ZoomText, a talking screen magnification program for persons with low vision made by AI Squared, Inc. (www.aisquared.com) and Premier Assistive Technology

(www.readingmadeeasy.com), which offers trial versions of all its products, including scan and read software, talking word processor, talking checkbook, and so forth.

For those interested in gaining advanced expertise in AT, The Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA) has developed a set of core competencies and established an examination that leads to national certification as an assistive technology practitioner (ATP).[5] OTAs with 2 years of full-time direct work experience in AT are eligible to take the exam (go to www.resna.org for details). Obtaining the ATP credential while continuing to work as an OTA can help emphasize the breadth of ways in which members of the profession can help clients participate in valued occupations. In situations where the OTA has an ATP credential but the OT does not, both need to establish a relationship in which the OT guides the intervention services, but the OTA is valued for his or her strengths, including specialized knowledge and contributions.

As you increase your knowledge, determine areas in which you see a need for AT assistance, and let administrators and teachers know how you can meet that need.

References

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