

Opening Doors to the Workplace for People With Disabilities

by Rick Bowers

When Frank (not his real name) was hired to work for a national nonprofit organization, he quickly realized that he would need special equipment to do his daily work. A bilateral upper-limb amputee who wears artificial limbs with split hooks, Frank was unable to use a regular computer keyboard and mouse efficiently – and a large part of his job required him to do so. Fortunately, although neither he nor his new supervisor knew exactly how to solve the problem, they were both willing to find out what it would take to help him succeed in his job.

A consultant at the Alliance for Technology Access (ATA), a nonprofit organization that helps people with disabilities reach their potential through assistive technology, told Frank and his supervisor about a special keyboard that he thought would work for him. Frank's company purchased one of the devices, and Frank is still using it today. It cost approximately \$300 and was the only special accommodation Frank needed to do his job.

The ADA

Fortunately for Frank and other amputees, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was passed in 1990 and prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities, requires employers with 15 or more employees to provide "reasonable accommodation" to employees with disabilities to help them perform their



jobs unless it would cause the employer "undue hardship" (*Job-Hunting for the So-Called Handicapped or People Who Have Disabilities*).

Reasonable accommodation, according to ADA guidelines, generally means any modification or adjustment that will enable a qualified person with a disability to apply for a job, to perform its essential functions, or to enjoy the rights and privileges of the job at the same level as those employees without a disability.

Obstacles that may need to be overcome through special accommodations may include procedural barriers such as work and break times and physical barriers such as inaccessible equipment or workplace facilities. Reasonable accommodations might include providing such devices as

speech-recognition software or special keyboards for people who only have one arm, providing access to workplace lunchrooms and restrooms for people in wheelchairs, or modifying a person's work schedule to allow him or her to take more breaks or attend physical therapy.

The Job Interview

If you are an amputee seeking employment, there will inevitably come a time when you will have to go to a company for a personal interview. Though interviews are stressful for everyone, if you have a disability, especially a visible

one, it can be even more difficult. As the employer speaks to you, perhaps you will feel that he or she is trying to determine how your disability will affect your ability to handle the job. He or she may also be trying to figure out how much money your disability will cost the company – how much the company will have to spend to provide "reasonable accommodations" to help you do your job. In fact, employers might not be willing to hire a person with a disability for fear that such accommodations are going to be extremely expensive.

Of course, this is not the reason they will give for not hiring you; they'll just make sure to find someone more qualified.

The Statistical Reality

Fortunately, providing “reasonable accommodations” is rarely a hardship for a company. The keyboard Frank needed cost only \$300. And that’s not unusual.

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN), for example, has shown that 15 percent of accommodations required for people with disabilities cost nothing, 51 percent cost between \$1 and \$500, 12 percent cost between \$501 and \$1000, and only 22 percent cost more than \$1000. Moreover, Francine Tishman, former executive director of the National Business and Disability Council, says that more than half cost less than \$100 (*Americans with Disabilities at Work*).

In addition, although an employer might expect to have to provide an expensive accommodation, such as installing a lower water fountain for an employee in a wheelchair, the accommodation might be provided less expensively by installing a paper cup dispenser next to the higher water fountain used by other employees. By using creative thinking, it is often possible to find a more economical way to satisfy the reasonable accommodation requirement.

Making It Easier

JAN, a free consulting service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the U.S. Department of Labor, provides people with disabilities, employers, and other interested parties information about accommodations to help people with disabilities acquire and keep jobs.

When an employer or employee doesn’t know how to solve a problem that is impeding the work of someone with a disability, JAN consultants – like the ATA did for Frank – can help him or her come up with solutions for specific situations.

In addition to providing solution ideas, numerous organizations even provide

funding for accommodations (see www.jan.wvu.edu/links/funding.htm), and the government offers tax incentives to employers to encourage them to be willing to make accommodations (see www.jan.wvu.edu/links/ADAtam1.html#III).

“Every state has vocational rehabilitation agencies whose sole purpose is to assist people with disabilities to obtain the skills, training and confidence necessary to enable them to take their rightful place in the economy,” says the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR). These agencies might also provide assistive technology, personal care attendants, a prosthesis, a wheelchair, a lift, adaptive driving equipment or transportation to help consumers perform their work duties. (For more information about vocational rehabilitation, see pages 20-21).

With the ADA on our side, the low cost of most accommodations, and help from organizations and the government in finding and paying for accommodations, employers really have little to fear. It’s only a matter of letting them know. ■

For more information on accommodations and adaptive technology that might help you, please contact the following:

Alliance for Technology Access

Phone: 707/778-3011
www.ATAccess.org

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

Phone: 800/526-7234
www.jan.wvu.edu

RESNA Technical Assistance Project

Phone: 703/524-6686
www.resna.org/taproject/index.html

Vocational Rehabilitation State Offices

<http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/SBSES/VOCREHAB.HTM>