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## Augmenting Workplace PAS Through the Use of Assistive Technology

### USING AT AND WPAS IN THE WORKPLACE

Many employees with significant disabilities know the importance of balancing Assistive Technology (AT) and WPAS when needed as an employment accommodation. Unfortunately, employees who need both accommodations are fearful that potential employers will consider the request for both accommodations unreasonable. Employers who do not fully understand the need for these employees to have both accommodations would probably agree. It is important for the employee to explain why both supports are needed to maximize their efficiency. In order to justify the need for both accommodations, the employee should become very knowledgeable about workplace AT and workplace PAS.

### THE PURPOSE OF USING WORKPLACE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

The main purpose of using workplace AT is to maximize the efficiency and productivity of the employee with a disability. For the employee with the disability who uses a workplace personal assistant and AT can significantly reduce the number of hours the WPA is needed. Even though some workplace AT can be expensive, most employers consider it a good investment if it increases the employee's productivity. Workplace AT can not only increase the employee's productivity, it can help him/her be more independent.

### UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF USING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN THE WORKPLACE

To be able to effectively use workplace AT, the employee with the disability must be familiar with its many applications with respect to various disabilities. Also, it is necessary for the employee to be able to explain AT options to their employer and supervisor. The following are six competencies that will help the employee with the disability better understand their AT options and to be able to explain those options to their employers.

Competencies	Employees with a Disability Should
Awareness of Technology	Research AT options to use at work.
Awareness of Disability	Identify their strengths and limitations and how AT can assist in overcoming them.
Awareness of Job Tasks	Identify essential job functions and determine how AT can help in accomplishing them.
Awareness of Training	Understand how the AT device works and train the WPA or co-workers in the AT devices use.
Awareness of Maintenance Options	Have awareness of how much maintenance or repair cost might be.
Awareness of Funding Options	Determine who is responsible for purchase of AT equipment and possible funding options or tax breaks the employer can utilize.

The employee with the disability who becomes proficient in these competency areas will most likely be successful at convincing their employer to meet their accommodation needs on the job.

## How Workplace Personal Assistance Can Be Used to Compliment Assistive Technology

For some employees with a significant disability, no matter how sophisticated their AT device is, there can still be a need for human support. This is because the workplace tasks can not always be met with some type of device, equipment, or computer software. For example, an employee with a speech impairment, may need a voice interpreter to be understood on phone calls, or conduct training activities. In this example, the employee has to explain to their employer why a mechanical piece of equipment will not meet their needs on the job. Making a clear explanation about the need for a workplace personal assistant is very important because most employers would rather accommodate the employee with a disability by purchasing an AT device. Employers see the purchase of equipment as being a one time expense instead of having to pay a workplace personal assistant on an ongoing basis. This may or may not be true, depending on the cost of the AT equipment, and the ongoing maintenance that might be required for the equipment. In such a case, it would be wise for the employee to point out to the employer that a trained WPA can not only assist the employee to complete tasks, but can also help with the maintenance and up keep of such a device which helps offset maintenance fees.

## Scenarios of Correct and Incorrect Ways to Request AT and WPAS as Employment Accommodations

**Employee A** has a spinal cord injury affecting his lower extremities, but requests a WPA to assist with word processing. In addition, he/she also requests an expensive computer that will support the Eye Gaze Computer program to assist in taking down written information. The projective wage of the WPA is around \$500/wk., a computer with the Eye Gaze costs around \$4,000. The employer rejected both requests as being unreasonable expenses resulting in that the employee with the disability remained unemployed.

**Employee B** has a disability affecting his/her coordination and dexterity. They request a WPA for 5 hours a day to assist with word processing, filing, and other clerical tasks. In addition the employee requested computer software to assist them the other three hours of work without the WPA. The employee is able to explain to the employer how both accommodations will enable them to be efficient and productive the entire 8 hour work day. The employer agrees the accommodation requests are reasonable and fair. In this scenario the results are positive for both the employee and the employer. The employee gets the job and the employer gains an efficient and productive employee.

In the above scenarios you can see the right and wrong way to request workplace accommodations. Employee A gave almost no justification to why he needed the workplace PA for 8 hours nor did they explain the need for the expensive AT device. On the other hand, employee B seemed to analyze his support needs a little better and was able to explain how both the WPA and computer software would make them productive the entire 8 hour workday. This resulted in having both accommodation request approved.

## Website Resources

For more information about various types of assistive technology equipment and devices, check the websites provided below:

Resources	Website
Job Accommodation Network (JAN)	<a href="http://www.janweb.icdi.wvu.edu">www.janweb.icdi.wvu.edu</a>
Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology of North America (RESNA)	<a href="http://www.resna.org">www.resna.org</a>
The Trace Center	<a href="http://www.trace.wise.edu/world/computeraccess">www.trace.wise.edu/world/computeraccess</a>
Office Max	<a href="http://www.officemax.com">www.officemax.com</a>
Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports	<a href="http://www.worksupport.com">www.worksupport.com</a>