Choosing Appropriate Assistive Technology

People with disabilities can use technology to improve their quality of life by developing new skills, keep old ones and live more independently. However, choosing the right technology is often a difficult task. This document offers basic principles, considerations and financial issues to address when considering a technology solution.

If you need more assistance on choosing the most appropriate assistive technology (AT), the KATS Network has Assistive Technology Resource Centers across the Commonwealth that can assist you in selecting appropriate AT solutions by providing demonstrations and/or short term loans of AT devices.

Some Basic Principles

No matter what the technology, the setting or the age of the user, these basic principles will ensure that the device you choose will help you do the job.

Use a team approach

Technology assessment teams usually come from different disciplines and can vary from team to team depending on the user's abilities and needs. Traditionally this team could include the user, a family member or significant other, medical personnel, rehabilitation specialists and occupational, physical and/or speech therapists. By adding nontraditional team members such as a local handy-person, someone good at crafts, or a classmate, these individuals could look at the issues differently and often provide valuable insights into purchasing the right technology. So don't be afraid to be a courageous problem solver. It will make for a much more elegant solution.

The user, family and other individuals are the most critical members

When the user is central to making the decision, the more likely it will effectively promote independence. Also the Family and Other individuals are the next critical members of the team. This is especially true for children. Parents will provide the reinforcement, maintenance, training and other aspects of supporting the technology the child will use. For adults, this can also be true, depending on the user's need for assistance. However, it's important to remember that just because an individual needed assistance in the past does not necessarily mean that they will need it in the future. An appropriate technology solution may dramatically decrease a person's need for help or eliminate it all together.

Focus on the function

By focusing attention on functional skills, we move away from looking at someone in a clinical way and more toward a functional assessment. When you want to focus on function a good question to ask is, "What does this person want or need to do that he/she currently cannot do?" From there the team can begin to look for ways to alter the environment to enable the person to function more independently.

Focus on simplicity

Even though there are thousands of technology gizmo's available, technology users only need what will help in accomplishing the task, in the simplest, most efficient way. It's been said that the best technology solution is a no-technology solution. Also keeping solutions simple also reduces maintenance and repair costs. Simple solutions are often easier to use and therefore will be used. Generally they are cheaper solutions, so a funding source (whether it is the user or a third party source) is more likely to fund it.

Keep the use of technology general

By thinking in general terms about the device, you can get more use or increase the effectiveness of the device.

Generalizing about the who, what, when, where, why and how aspects of the product can help the user find a product that meets many, rather than just a specific need. However, remember that if several family members use a device, it will limit access to third party payers.

Considerations for Choosing Technology

Technology users need to be informed consumers. They should constantly ask questions about how the technology will work for them and how a device will help them accomplish their goals. No matter who pays for the device, technology users are obligated to ensure the device is used. Funding sources want to make sure any device they purchase with dwindling resources is fully utilized. So, whether you are using your own precious resources, or third-party payer funds, consumers need to ensure that they spend money wisely.

Personal Considerations

Does it help me do what I want/need to do?

If it doesn't, then don't get it! Many people receive technology and from day one it does not work for them. When this happens, you can be sure the user was not an integral part of the assessment team. More than likely the team told the user what would work for him/her. As a consumer of technology and services, you should never allow that to happen. Speak up for yourself and your needs.

Are there any limitations or risks?

Users often see the benefit of AT, but don't bother looking at the other side. While the technology may help you do what you want to do, it may also limit other aspects of your life.

Is it comfortable to use?

If it is not comfortable, it will eventually be discarded. Better to speak up during the assessment process than wait until it's over and the device is in the closet, and you are no closer to your goal than you were before the process began.

May I have a trial period to see if it works for me?

Let the buyer beware. Don't get caught in the trap of thinking you have to purchase the device outright before you agree to use it. Always ask for a trial period. Most reputable vendors will allow you to rent the device for a month or two and then apply the rental payments toward the purchase. Others have a 30-60 day return policy on the device if it does not work for you. It's common for users to successfully use a device in an insulated clinical setting (when evaluating or learning about the device) and still be unable to use it in a 'real world' setting. It's not until you try it in the real world that you can be sure the device will work for you!

Training considerations

Is it ready to use and how do I set it up?

The device you are trying out may seem simple enough to use, but it may have taken the evaluator three days to program it so that you could use it. Therefore, ask about the set up, what you will need to know about it and how you can access other functions/capabilities of the device.

What skills do I need to learn?

By asking this question, the team needs to assess the technology's appropriateness and any learning curves the user may need to get comfortable with a device.

Where do I get training and is it included in the purchase price?

Will the person who conducts the assessment also provide your training? Do you have a good rapport with him/her? Will the training come from the sales representative? Is there a 24-hour support line available should you need it? How long will that be available to you? Are you responsible for payment of the training of yourself and others?

Access considerations

Where can I use the AT?

Think about what uses you have for a specific device. If you will use it in multiple settings, how well will it travel? Can I use it indoors or out? How does moisture affect functioning? Is there room for it there? Is it noisy? Will it disturb others around you? Will it need to be reprogrammed to use it in different settings? Who will do that? Will that limit the use? Is it bulky? Can use it in all settings?

What is the battery life (and are they replaceable)?

Battery life is a HUGE issue when considering technology. If you don't stop to ask this question PRIOR to the purchase, you may have a non-functioning device when you need it. If the device requires recharging after every three hours of use, and you will use it twice that amount of time, obviously you'll need extra batteries. But if you don't ask, you won't know. Batteries eventually wear out. Find out if the batteries can be replaced by the end-user.

If powered, can you plug it in, or is there a power source where you want to use it?

You can often conserve battery life by "plugging in." So, think about the places you can hook your technology to an electric outlet.

Repair and maintenance

Is it reliable?

The best place to get this information is to ask other users. They have experience with the device, its quirkiness, features and reliability. To find other users, contact an assistive technology resource center, a local independent living center, or other disability related social service agency. Ask them to help you find someone who has used the device. Remember that the vendors and manufacturers are there to sell products, not necessarily to be candid about product reliability.

What is the life expectancy and average use?

Nothing lasts forever and at some point your technology will reach the end of its natural life. Knowing the life expectancy of a device will help you decide if it's time to repair or replace the device. Funding sources should also be aware that eventually, replacing the device is far more cost effective or efficient than repairing it. Also not all devices can be used constantly. Find out what the manufacturer considers an average amount of use for the device.

What does the guarantee/warranty cover?

Some manufacturers provide a 'bumper-to-bumper' warranty; others provide a sort of "cash and carry/as is" coverage for their device. Finding out what the guarantee/warranty covers after the purchase is too late. Kentucky also has a Lemon Law covering assistive technology devices. For more information about the Lemon Law, please contact the KATS Network using the information listed below.

Is repair service convenient?

Find out where the device will need to go for maintenance and repair. If you need to send it to Outer Mongolia, it's going to take a long time to get there and get back. Perhaps another device can do the same job and repairs will be closer. Also, find out if the vendor has loaner equipment available while your device is in the shop.

What is considered regular maintenance?

You may be able to perform some of the maintenance yourself. Other maintenance may need specialized training. Find out what kind of maintenance your device needs, and to prolong the life of the device follow the directions carefully.

Financial issues

Funding guide

Financial issues often scare people away from devices. They think, "I'd love to have that, but gosh . . . I could

never afford it." Don't get caught in that mind set. By going through the process of finding out exactly what you need, you will provide the documentation that a funding source needs to purchase the device for you. The KATS Network offers a funding directory called "The Buck Starts Here… A Guide to Assistive Technology Funding in Kentucky." This directory can help you navigate through the steps to purchase assistive technology through the various funding streams. To obtain a copy of this directory, please contact the KATS Network at (800) 327-5287 or visit our website at katsnet.org.

Assistive Technology Lending Libraries

The KATS Network Assistive Technology Resource Centers (ATRC) can also provide short term loans of assistive technology for a try-before-you-buy opportunity. You can access more information on the KATS Network Short Term Loan Program by visiting the KATS Network website or contacting the nearest ATRC. The centers are a part of the Kentucky AT Locator online lending library and exchange site for Assistive Technology. This is a free online service to find equipment available for loan, sale, demonstration, or giveaway. The available technology for loan can be viewed on the site. Log on and register at katsnet.at4all.com.

KATS Network Regional Assistive Technology Resource Centers (ATRCs)

enTECH @ Spalding University - Louisville

800-896-8941

Redwood Assistive Technology Center - Ft. Mitchell

800-728-9807

Western KY Assistive Technology Center - Owensboro

800-209-6202

AT Resource Center at Carl Perkins

800-443-2187

For more information contact the KATS Network at 800-327-5287 or visit katsnet.org

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