

# SELECTING AND OBTAINING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

## IPAT

“For most people, technology makes things easier.

For people with disabilities, however, technology makes things **POSSIBLE.**”

*Mary Pat Radabaugh*

*IBM National Support*

*Center for Persons with Disabilities*

**Eric**, injured while farming, continues to run the family farm thanks to adaptations made to his already existing farm equipment and the provision of an alternative access method to his computerized bookkeeping program.

**Terry**, who has significant motor limitations resulting from a diving accident, continues to work at his job as an information and referral line specialist using a motorized wheelchair, a voice-activated computer and a hands-free telephone system.

**Amy**, an elementary school student experiencing vision loss, continues to play with her friends at recess using “beeping” basketballs, soccerballs and Frisbees.

### Selecting and Obtaining Assistive Technology

**For persons with** a disability, assistive technology devices and services can be the key to greater independence, productivity and assimilation. An assistive technology device is any item used to maintain or improve a person’s functional capabilities. An assistive technology service is any service that helps an individual select, acquire or learn to use an assistive technology device.

**Buying a telephone** is pretty simple these days. Pick one up at your local discount electronics store, take it home, plug it in and call a friend. If it doesn’t work or lacks the features you want, just take it back and exchange it.

**Selecting assistive technology** is usually not so simple. Finding the “best fit” between person, environment and technology is a multi-step process. Prospective consumers and those helping them must carefully gather and evaluate information and then make informed decisions. This process is important because bad decisions waste time, money and patience. Poorly chosen equipment may be of little help to the user or even end up unused in a closet.

### Steps in Selecting & Obtaining Assistive Technology

#### Define Your Goal

**What do you want to accomplish?**

The first question to answer is: What does the individual want the technology to enable them to do that they are currently limited in doing? This defines the critical “feature match” between the consumer and the technology.

### **Determine the Assessment Team**

Assessment is a task which requires input from the individual requiring assistive technology, family members, educational, medical and vocational professionals, co-workers and caregivers. A good rule of thumb is to include anyone who frequently works with the consumer or the technology on the assessment team.

Remember, if funding is tied to educational objectives or medical diagnosis, there may be formal requirements that certain professionals be involved and certain documentation be obtained. Having the appropriate individuals on the assessment team is vital to a successful outcome.

### **Assess the Prospective Consumer**

An assessment should include an accurate description of the individual’s abilities and limitations in sensory, cognitive and motor terms. It should specify what the person can do as well as indicate what assistance or accommodations are needed.

### **Assess the Environment**

Will the technology enable the individual to achieve the desired functional goal in all the environments where it is likely to be used? Who else will be interacting with that person and the technology in those various environments?

### **Assess the Technology**

If choices are available, what device, adaptation or system is the “best match” in light of the identified needs and environments for the individual with a disability?

### **Factors to Consider**

Which device allows the greatest independence?

Is the device easy to use; does it require training prior to use? If training is required, where and how can one obtain it? What will it cost?

If the device is to be used in more than one setting, is it easy to transport from place to place?

Is the device reliable and durable? How does one go about getting it repaired should it breakdown? How difficult and time-consuming is it to obtain service on the device?

Does the device pose any safety risks to those that may work with it?

Is the consumer comfortable with the way that the technology looks, feels and sounds? Is it age, gender and culturally appropriate?

### **Choose a Device or System**

#### **IPAT (1-800-265-4728 Voice-TDD)**

The Interagency Project for Assistive Technology (IPAT) has extensive information on a wide range of services, devices and adaptations.

IPAT's regional coordinators can discuss your needs with you and furnish verbal or printed information about services, devices and manufacturers. They may also be able to direct you to additional sources of information or to IPAT service providers in your area.

IPAT has a loan library system for short term use of a variety of assistive technology devices. Call to organize a trial period on your technology solution prior to purchase.

### **Select a Vendor**

It is not enough that a particular vendor sells a piece of equipment that an individual needs. The dealer's consumer responsiveness, professionalism and service orientation should be an important part of your decision process.

#### **Questions to Ask**

How long has the dealer been in business?

Do they have knowledge about particular disabilities and equipment being sold?  
How was that knowledge gained?

Does the dealer stay up-to-date on new developments in both technology and rehabilitation? How?

How long has the dealer supplied the device you are interested in?

What is the dealer's responsibility if errors occur in measuring, ordering, assembling or delivering the device?

Does the dealer provide training? For how long: at what cost? Can they refer to other sources for training?

Does the dealer carry professional liability insurance?

Is the dealer willing to provide the names of previous customers using similar equipment as references?

## **Service Questions**

Does the dealer have in-house service people and parts inventory adequate locally to service the device?

What is the average “turn-around” time for a repair?

Will the dealer provide a written estimate of cost and time for a repair?

Will the dealer make comparable loaner equipment available during a repair?

Does the dealer provide a warranty on service or customization of equipment?

## **Seek Funding**

Assistive technology ranges in price from relatively inexpensive to extremely expensive. Finding assistance with funding may take considerable time and effort, so an individual needs to begin to investigate funding sources at the time they start looking at assistive technology.

Major sources of third party payments for the purchase of assistive technology are insurance, agencies that provide educational and vocational services and philanthropic organizations. Determining eligibility, obtaining the required documentation and monitoring the approval process take time, patience and attention to detail.

IPAT’s regional coordinators have a variety of resources for consumer use when seeking assistance with funding and may be able to direct individuals to potential funding sources.

Purchasing used equipment can reduce cost: IPAT’s Used Equipment Bulletin Board (1-800-451-8693) lists used equipment for give-away, swap or sale.

If differences of opinion exist regarding assistive technology recommendations and funding eligibility, advocacy services are available through the IPAT Project.

## **Determine Training Needs**

The arrival of a piece of equipment is not the end of the process. Both the consumer and anyone else who works with the consumer and the device should receive appropriate training. This may be provided by the dealer, a representative of the manufacturer or the staff person from a medical or educational setting. Training helps insure that the technology is used effectively, safely and consistently in all the relevant environments. Proper use and maintenance also minimizes the costs and inconvenience of breakdowns and repairs.

## **Conduct Follow-Up**

Short-term follow-up should be performed within a couple months after the individual has had a chance to become familiar with the technology.

### **Questions to Ask**

Does the assistive technology permit the user to achieve the stated functional goals?

Is the consumer comfortable and proficient with the technology, or in the case of more complex technology, are they making good progress in learning the system? If not, what changes can be made to ease this process?

Are adjustments in the equipment or additional training needed?

## **Re-evaluation Needs**

Long-term re-evaluation should also be performed on a regular basis, perhaps annually. This is necessary because people change and assistive technologies change.

### **Questions to Ask**

Have the functional capabilities of the consumer increased or declined in ways that effect the use of the technology?

Is the individual functioning in environments different from those when the technology was first selected?

Has the device developed problems that justify replacing it or do newer versions have sufficiently greater capacities or ease of use to justify a substitution?

Consumers who experience changes, either in themselves or in their environment that affect the usefulness of their equipment, need to be proactive in seeking re-evaluation.

## **North Dakota Sources of Assistive Technology Devices and Services**

For information regarding assistive technology for visual impairments, call the North Dakota School for the Blind at **1-800-421-1181**.

For information regarding education-related assistive technology, call the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction at **1-701-328-2277**.

For information about work site modification, call the North Dakota Office of Vocational Rehabilitation at **1-800-755-2745**.

These programs all share information with IPAT.

*IPAT is sponsored by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, U.S. Department of Education. This material does not necessarily reflect the views of the NIDRR/ED, or indicate official endorsement of the contents.*

**For More Information About:**

- ◆ The availability of assistive technology devices,
- ◆ Where to obtain them,
- ◆ How much they cost,
- ◆ Dealers and vendors,
- ◆ Device modification and creation,
- ◆ The availability of assistive technology assessments,
- ◆ Assistive technology training, equipment and use,
- ◆ Suggestions about where to obtain assistance in paying for assistive technology,
- ◆ Advocacy assistance for assistive technology,
- ◆ Used assistive devices others have for sale, and
- ◆ Borrowing assistive technology devices for the loan library system

**Call:**

**Assistive Technology Info-Line  
1-888-214-2780 (Voice/TDD)**

**or**

**IPAT Project Office  
1-800-265-4728 (Voice/TDD)**

Alternative formats available.