

Conference Presentations

Workshop no 2 "Leveraging Technology to Promote the Employment of People with Motor Disabilities"

Rapporteur: Ms Dawn Green, (UK) Research and Development Department, Portland College, Vocational Centre for people with disabilities

Thank you. Earlier this afternoon in workshop two we enjoyed four presentations by experts in the field of supporting disabled people. The use of ICT and assistive and adaptive technologies. In this primary session I'll attempt to summarize the major content of the issues that arose from these presentations. Giving a flavour to the content for those of you who weren't able to be there, presenting our points for further consideration and discussion at a national and EU level.

The first presenter was Stathis Triantafyllou who gave us a lively and interesting account of the system of assistive technologies. He introduced himself somewhat amusingly as a rebel psychologist and qualified his statement by saying that he started off as a psychologist and then moved into a technological field of work. He went on to demonstrate how harnessing assistive and adaptive technologies can give invaluable links to the society for a disabled person.

Examples of assistive and adaptive technologies were shown photographically demonstrating the many kind of switches, roller-balls, joysticks, keyboards and mouse simulations that can empower a disabled person to use ICT effectively. The adaptations I just mentioned are just examples of the hard work, but it is essential for the trainee to access appropriate software as well. The hardware is not at all useful without the software and vice versa. However well adapted either may be.

Other examples of assistive and adaptive technologies include environmental control units, alternative communication devices for those who don't possess the power of speech, and motorized wheelchairs.

Nikos Katevas went on to show us how certain development activities and advances in this area have outstripped the capacity of manufacturers. He showed us many examples of innovative technology and described the frustrations encountered to get manufacturers to produce his ideas.

Consequently disabled people are often limited to using the assistive and adaptive technology devices that are commercially available. Until the general public, companies and educators are motivated by such ideas, this will continue to be the case. Key players must share a vision and understanding of how assistive and adaptive technology can be

applied to help to integrate the disabled people to the society. Otherwise only limited progress will be made.

Harris Vasileiou went on to give a fascinating presentation about the opportunities presented to a disabled person through the medium of tele-working. He showed how this flexible working model can potentially be used, enabling a disabled person to manage their work life balance in accordance with their needs. Tele- working can be used to overcome many of the challenges facing disabled people. A distance working approach means that the person can work from home thus negating the need for adaptations to the work place. Working hours must be negotiated between the individual and the company concerned. For example, so that disabled person could build their personal care and medical routines into the working day. Teleworking could present a positive concept for the employment of the disabled people, if applied effectively. It could also do much to promote an inclusive working environment. Ultimately the onset of teleworking could have a wide social and economic impact. Possibilities for developing this mode of working would be part of the work of PROTEAS. Teleworking takes into consideration the needs of the users and far from isolating them within their home environment, it could be instrumental in integration and enhancing their productivity.

The followed presentation by Andy Anderson looked at initiatives in England to enable individuals to work using ICT. The focus is very firmly on ability and on disability and empowerment. The project aims to create new opportunities and integrate people into society through IT. Clients are given computer hardware and software with full internet access and are supported by the use of volunteers: a motivational factor in the absence of typical peer group support.

Andy made interesting reference to the fact that 75% of disabled people need no adaptations to use a computer effectively. Likening a computer to a car... Andy stated how to use accessibility options such as sticky keys and enhanced sized fonts, et cetera.

The organization has a website through which clients and prospective employers can meet. Jobs are advertised here and clients can post their CV's on the site. Partnership working and shared understanding and vision, are essential features in making this initiative work.

In summary, I will aim to identify the major issues arising from the four presentations. ICT and assistive and adaptive technologies can be used to include disabled people in employment and integrate them into society. We should adapt the technology and not the individual. A shared vision is required by users, families, practitioners, employers, professionals and policy makers, to promote inclusivity and integration. We should seek innovative and flexible modes of employment to engage as many disabled people as possible in the work place. Education and awareness-raising is critical to overcome ignorance in terms of both the employment of disabled people and means of harnessing technology to meet their needs. Initiatives to overcome the financial barriers to expensive adaptations must be sought. We should work together to give disabled people a voice as the human cost to fail to meet individual needs is immense. Given appropriate access,

adaptations and training, it has been proved that disabled people can contribute positively to the economy and the society.

I will finish with the quote from Andy's presentation: "All people are equal before a computer screen", Professor Steven Hawkins at Cambridge University had said that and with that quote in mind, I urge you all to contribute to strive for a better deal for disabled people. Thank you.