



Tools for Living: Assistive Technology on the Job

Assistive Technology (AT) is often crucial in removing barriers to employment and in enabling workers with disabilities to work more productively. Of the 1507 working-age adults who responded to the Community Research for Assistive Technology (CR4AT) survey on AT usage, 307 or 20% were actually working. But, as the reader will see, the impact of AT on those who are working is profound. *

Among the 20% who were working, only 6% had full-time jobs, 10% had part-time work and 4% were self employed. Interestingly, 24% of those who were working indicated that they were not working as many hours as they would like.

What types of equipment are used on the job?

When asked if they used AT on the job, 44% of those who were working indicated that they did. Telephone headsets were the most commonly used AT devices at work (15% of employed respondents), followed by wheelchairs (13%), magnifiers (9%), adapted computer screens (such as a large or movable monitor (9%), tape recorders (8%), and voice activated software (7%). Adapted keyboards, wrist splints, adapted mice, and screen readers were all used by about 5 or 6 percent of working respondents.

Wheelchairs were the most commonly used devices among employed respondents with mobility impairments (31%), and magnifiers were the AT most often used by those with visual impairments (32%). Among working respondents with hearing impairments, hearing or amplification devices were most often used (26%). Among the devices asked about, no single device was used by more than one-eighth of working respondents with cognitive or mental health disabilities.

Main AT devices used to perform job duties, by type of disability

	All respondents	Mobility impairment	Visual impairment	Hearing impairment	Cognitive impairment	Mental health disability
	<i>Percent of employed respondents</i>					
Telephone headset	15	20	16	12	8	10
Wheelchair	13	31	0	6	11	2
Magnifier	9	9	32	12	5	10
Adapted computer screen	9	10	18	10	10	12
Tape recorder	8	7	18	8	11	8
Voice activated software	7	10	12	8	7	4
Adapted keyboard	6	8	7	8	6	7
Wrist splints	6	10	11	10	2	5
Adapted mouse	6	10	4	4	4	4
Screen reader	5	3	18	8	6	4
Hearing aid/amplification device	4	3	5	26	2	5
Amplified telephone	4	5	11	16	2	5

*See back cover for survey and demographic information.

How do people get the equipment they need for work?

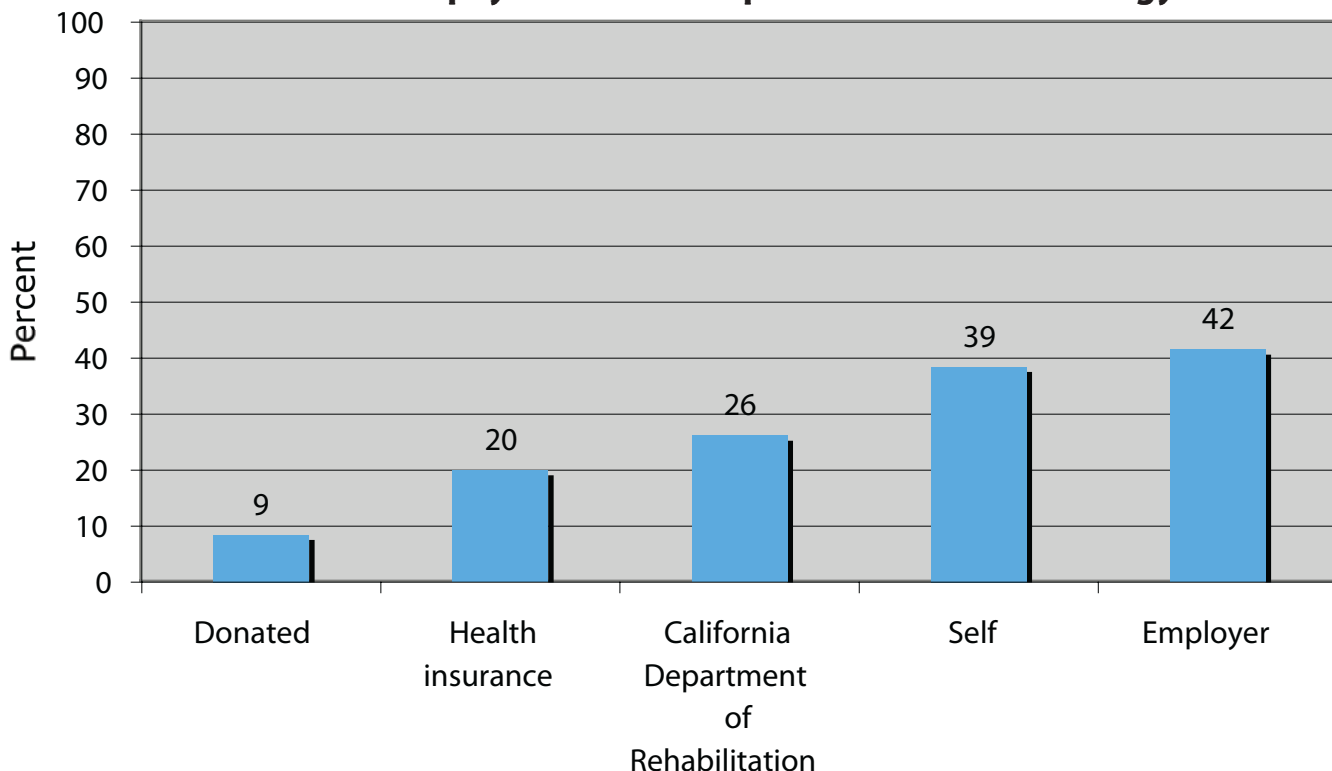
Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act indicates that employers are to pay for accommodations on the job which are reasonable. Of the respondents that were working, only 30% had ever asked their employers for job accommodations that included assistive technology. A majority of the requests (60%) were approved. Others were referred to the Department of Rehabilitation in the hopes that DOR would pay for it (16%). In the remaining instances, the employee was asked to purchase it (9%) or the request was denied (7%).

The top funder for AT on the job was the employer (42%). This makes sense, given that when people asked, employers were likely to provide the needed equipment. However,

a problem arises when employers purchase equipment: the employee with a disability cannot take it with him or her when making a job change. This may explain why the next highest purchaser of equipment was the employee with a disability, at 39%.

The Department of Rehabilitation, whose mandate is to help people with disabilities go to work and which is charged with providing necessary equipment, was a distant third, at 26%, in paying for such equipment. One of the advantages of getting equipment paid for by the DOR is they recognize that people with disabilities will most likely need the equipment throughout their career and allow the consumer to keep the equipment.

Sources of payment for workplace assistive technology

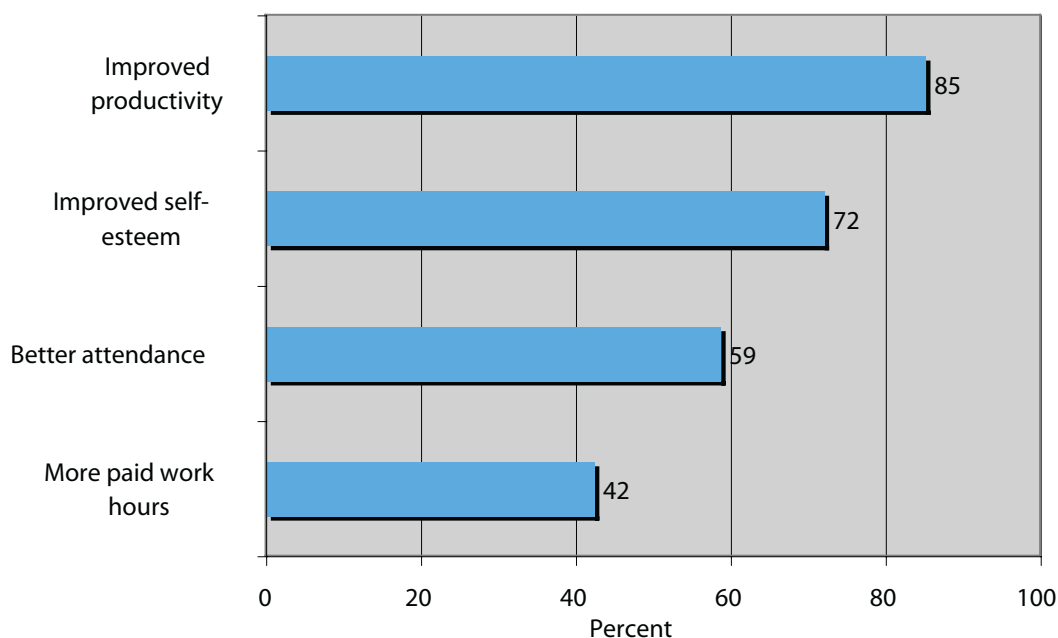


How does having AT on the job benefit workers with disabilities?

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported that they benefited substantially from AT at work. Some 28% of workplace AT users reported that their AT had helped them “immensely,” and an additional 36% said it helped them “a lot.” Slightly more than one-quarter answered “average” (18%) or “a little” (10%). Only 8% reported that workplace AT did not help them at all.

The vast majority of respondents using AT at work said they derived specific benefits from their devices. The most often cited benefit was improved productivity, with 85% of respondents answering “yes” or “somewhat” to the question of whether AT helped them in this regard. Next was improved self-esteem, cited by 72%. Better attendance was cited by 59% and more paid work hours by 42%.

Benefits from using AT at work



Call to Action

If as a society, we are truly serious about expecting people with disabilities to go to work, then there is much to be done. With a large number of working respondents reporting such positive benefits from using AT on the job, clearly such equipment needs to be more readily available. The types of equipment consumers said they used or needed on the job were usually not very expensive and, for the most part, “off the shelf.” Employers need to understand the positive impact on their bottom line of providing AT, and they need to change their policies accordingly. Government policy makers and agencies promoting employment for people with disabilities need to understand the extent to which AT improves employability and productivity of workers with disabilities, and they need to increase funding levels and increase availability of workplace AT. They would also do well to step up efforts to make people with disabilities aware of the benefits of work and how AT can make them more employable.

The Community Research for Assistive Technology Survey

During 2005, the Community Research for Assistive Technology (CR4AT) project of the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers (CFILC) launched a survey on assistive technology (AT) usage among the consumers of independent living centers throughout California. AT was defined broadly to include any device or equipment used to maintain or improve functioning, including devices used for mobility, seeing, hearing, communication, and performing everyday tasks.

A survey was mailed to 14,000 randomly selected consumers from 20 independent living centers, and 1,919 responses were received. Respondents were given a \$20 stipend for filling out the survey, which looked at demographics and socio-economic status, equipment usage and the impact it has on everyday life, barriers to getting equipment, and the benefits of AT usage in the workplace and in the community.

People with all types of disabilities responded to the survey, with 63% reporting mobility impairments, 29% reporting mental health disabilities, 24% cognitive or other developmental disabilities, 23% visual impairments, 20% hearing impairments, 14% health-related physical disabilities, and 13% speech impairments. A majority of respondents (55%) reported more than one type of disability. Most respondents (81%) were working-age adults, of whom only 20% were employed. Racial and ethnic minorities were well represented, with 17% of respondents identifying as Latino, 16% African American, 6% American Indian, and 3% Asian or Pacific Islander.



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Improving Access Through Collaboration



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