Transcript: The Importance of the Assistive Technology Assessment in Supporting Employees with Disabilities in the Enterprise; Harris Rosensweig and Jeff Ermold. AccessibilityPlus 2022.

Harris Rosensweig

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Harris Rosensweig. I'm the Director of Accessibility.

Jeff Ermold

My name is Jeff Ermold and I'm the Director of Training for iYellow Access.

Harris Rosensweig

Welcome to "The Importance of the Assistive Technology Assessment in Supporting Employees with Disabilities in the Enterprise. Jeff and I will be taking you through the webinar topics today. A little bit of background about our company iYellow Access. We've been around since 1982 and this is actually our 40th year anniversary. Some of you may know us from our original name of TCS, and recently we became a part of a group of companies led by Jessica Aiello.

The iYellow Group is comprised of iYelllow Interpreting, a sign language interpreting company; iYellow Captions, a captioning and transcription services company; and our company iYellow Access. All of our companies are dedicated to the advancement of equal access for persons with disabilities, whether in the enterprise, the education space, or one-on-one in the home. Some of our webinars a little more technically oriented, whether it's on the accessibility of Microsoft Office or the G-Suite or PDFs or web accessibility.

Some are on general accessibility topics for the disability community. Like one we did on Accessibility of Voting for Persons Who Are Blind. Others like the one we're doing today, center on the accessibility in the enterprise, whether in the public or the private sector. This webinar is actually part of a series for us, which came from our deep experience working with industry and public sector and what we call our My AT Program which provides on-demand AT services to enterprises on an ongoing or as needed basis.

And it's through the My AT Program and supporting entities around this very thorny topic of accommodation and all that it entails, what I call the last mile of accessibility, where you have a specific individual with specific needs, with a specific disability who needs some form of accommodation. The other way we support organizations is assisting them in implementing best practices and helping them to put in place processes around accommodating employees with disabilities.

In our first webinar in the series, we discuss some key areas you should consider in supporting your employees with disabilities at your organization. From having a clear process for an employee to request an accommodation, the AT assessment itself, ensuring there's a clear process around implementing the recommendations that are made, coordination around the procurement of that equipment and how it's implemented, provision of assistive technology training and post-training support services.

In this webinar, we're going to be exclusively focused on the assistive technology assessment and how it's really the cornerstone of the accommodation process in your organization. Because all accommodations processes really flow from a well executed assessment. So let's review our presentation goals. I'm going to turn it over to my partner here, Jeff.

Jeff Ermold

Hey, thanks, Harris. We're going to start with the breaking down the subtopics that we're going to cover here. And really, as Harris mentioned, the assistive technology assessment is a key part. And perhaps the most important part of a reasonable accommodation process. So kind of breaking that down to a little more detail. We're going to talk about why the AT assessment is a critical part of a culture of equal access for all employees.

We're going to discuss why the assistive technology assessment is the cornerstone of an effective reasonable accommodations process. And then talk about the role of the assessment and where it fits within that accommodation. We're going to talk about the types of assessments that can be performed by organizations such as us, iYellow Access, and kind of highlight the process and resources that are required and the teams that need to be assembled around all of that.

And then we're going to finally talk about the skill sets that are needed to perform a thorough AT assessment So we're going to start by time doing a little role play exercise here. And our first example, it really illustrates the importance of the need for an AT assessment. So we get these kinds of requests quite often and essentially requests for training.

Sometimes training and software might come in and be it specific in terms of the number of training hours and the items that are needed. So this is a typical request that might come in and say on a Monday morning and Harris and I will be discussing what's in this request.

This is an employee who has actually lost their vision, losing vision. And we received a new case. And Harris, you can kind of run through more specifics about what's on this document that we received.

Harris Rosensweig

Thanks, Jeff. The new request from FSRA for 8 hours of training for one of their employees.

Jeff Ermold

Okay. That sounds good. What's the training on? Do we know what software it's on? And did they give me any details on what they want the training to focus on?

Harris Rosensweig

Well, I don't have much information. I've got a short email from the employee's supervisor, and they say his name is Jim, stating they they want some accommodations for him. He recently lost a lot of vision and they've actually shipped some equipment to him. Look down the list. They shipped a new laptop with a copy of the JAWS screen reader, zoom-text screen magnification software, two large monitors, and a scanning pen.

Now, we're going to fast forward two weeks ahead when we assigned one of our trainers, Ben, to go on site. And here's what we found.

Jeff Ermold

Yes, Just getting back to you on that training we talked about a couple of weeks ago. Ben was able to go down there, and it was kind of an interesting situation. You know, unfortunately, we've seen this quite a bit. He advised that things didn't go so well or certainly they weren't as was documented in the request. So basically what happened when he got there, he discovered that the laptop was still in the box. So there really hadn't been any assistance or instructions provided to the employee in terms of how to set it up.

You know, she's working remotely now with the pandemic. So it hadn't even been connected to the agency's VPN. So he was able to get the laptop on her network or Wi-Fi and the PIV card and walk her through that. But again, it took quite a bit of time. He was on the phone with the IT Support for quite some time.

And while he was doing that, he did kind of a bit of a mini-assessment because he had some time to do that. And it was really obvious to him that an AT assessment hadn't been done. So in order to kind of make things as productive as possible, he took a look at what magnification level that she was using, and it was about 7X.

So pretty substantial magnification He also found that she needed really to use speech output. You know, it's not, it's a magnification level where it was really straining and it was getting difficult to, you know, for her to really do anything very efficiently because she wasn't able to see very much content at the time. So the also the big thing here, though, is he discovered that she wasn't an touch typist. So that's going to present some challenges now with her, especially his recommendation would be to really focus on the typing skills and, you know, really

to learn those keyboard commands for JAWS she's going to need that basic keyboarding skill.

Harris Rosensweig

Oh, boy. I could see that was really a poor use of the time that they had alloted, and they had only allotted 8 hours. I can see that given the level of her vision, the two monitors really aren't going to be very useful. And the fact that, as you say, she's not a touch typist. That means she's going to have to first learn how to type and learn that with speech outlet and not using her eyes.

Also, that that scanner pen. I really haven't found that a very good tool for someone who doesn't have very good vision. Also, we're just going to need a lot more time given that the computer is not even set up on the network.

Jeff Ermold

That's right. So, you know, it's a classic case. It really just sounds like that checklist assessment approach. You see that, you know, quite a bit.

Harris Rosensweig

Yeah. So this is our first example and we want to kind of jump out of the role play and discuss this example a little bit more and then segueway to maybe a more formal discussion of the technology assessment and its various components. So the first thing we're looking at, this example is that it seems like this organization did not have a formal process around accommodating their employee.

And when accommodations are being requested an organization really needs to ensure that they have processes in place to properly assess the individual, to determine what technologies and strategies are going to be most beneficial to procure those technologies, install and configure them, and then ensure the employee receives proper training and post training support. So what went wrong here? As Jeff was saying, they used what seemed like a checklist approach. A person is diagnosed with vision problems, and all of a sudden they get a bunch of monitors, a scanning pen, and this zoom software.

So a comprehensive assessment was was not done. It seems like a skilled assistive technology professional who really understood disability and technology was not used, which led to inappropriate recommendations. And because the consumer had no functional vision, the monitors were really of no use because she wasn't a touch typist. They needed this touch typing program compatible with the screen reader.

And even if everything was pre-installed and our trainer had gone down there, he couldn't have really done much because the person, again, did not know how to touch type. Also, it was evident there was no coordination with the IT department that this laptop was being shipped down and it wasn't even configured and ready to go when our trainer arrived. In short, this was a horrible waste of time, resources, and money, which led to a completely demoralized employee - something we do

not want So I'm going to turn it back over to Jeff as we as we go back into more of our formal discussion of AT assessments.

Jeff Ermold

I'm going to talk about what is the definition of an assistive technology assessment. Well, it's a bit of a mouthful, but this kind of describes it. It's the process of determining what strategies, technologies, and training are necessary to enable the employee requesting reasonable accommodations to perform the essential functions of their job at the level expected. So the bottom line there is matching the technology, the accessibility, the training, the support, all of that to give the employee with a disability, the employee using assistive technology, a level playing field to give them all of the tools necessary to do that job competitively and at the level expected. So that's that's what all of that means in a nutshell. Kind of drilling down, our next question. Basically, we do an AT assessment any time something changes. So, you know, that question comes up quite a bit.

I think there's an assumption sometimes that, you know, when do you notice that's the way you do an assessment or maybe when someone is hired. That is one example. Sometimes employees are hired and they already use assistive technology, say, on another job. So they they know the basic, the core technologies that they use. But again, coming into a new environment that may need to be assessed again, because it's a different environment, different applications, maybe different operating system, all those sorts of things, Also, when a disability occurs, now the disability could be temporary.

It could be something like maybe an injury say, from a fall or some sort of accident that will heal. But in the meantime, you know, somebody might need assistance, say, they might not be able to type. So possibly some dictation or different tools to get them through. But ultimately it's going to be more of a temporary situation. Also, there are disabilities, obviously, are onset in the middle of a career and some of them are progressive.

And we'll talk a little bit more that in our second example. But that's an example of a disability that is going to be there and it might change and progress. So that really takes a little bit of a longer term view to be able to plan out so that your accommodation's strategy allows for the change in the progression of the disability.

Another example when we would want to do an assessment is when the job tasks change. So if there's a change in the role, maybe someone got a promotion, or they moved within the organization, the job functions usually obviously are going to change. So that means different screens, different applications. And we want to make sure, does the set of the current accommodations that you're using, is it accessible with these new applications?

So some testing sometimes is in order and possibly more training. Training with a subject matter expert, training with the new supervisor with the new functions that they're going to do on the job. We have to incorporate the assistive technology into

that because that's how they're going to navigate those screens And any time technology changes within the organization. So if the operating system gets upgraded or Microsoft Office or proprietary applications, those are all examples where you might need to do an AT assessment to make sure that again, that accommodation is still effective.

It's it's important for organizations to have a really clear process around the RA - reasonable accommodations process as a whole. So we won't go into that entirely. Again we're focusing on the assessment, but there really should be a clear process within any organization for how does a person request an accommodation and what's the communication that they can expect around that.

Can they get all the information? Can they research possible options? A lot of organizations that we work with have a very robust portal with a lot of information on different disability categories, different assistive technology categories, and a catalog of things that might be available. Again, that just gives somebody resources that they can do some planning and reviewing. But ultimately we do recommend the assessment in most cases. So you want to just kind of look at that whole process, make sure you have all of the people involved that you need.

It's very cross-functional. Often it covers human resources, it covers procurement, it covers the individual and their management, it covers IT. So think about all of the things, all the people that are going to need to touch this situation, so to speak, in order to implement it as quickly and effectively as possible.

Also want to make sure and this is, I think, the area that's overlooked the most, as evidenced by our first example, is that often an assessment isn't done because there is not a person on the reasonable accommodations team or in that process that has the skill set for assistive technology. So you want to make sure you have that knowledge in-house, someone that is truly skilled in assessing disability, functionality, and technology altogether.

And particularly in large enterprise setting. Because when enterprise settings or even if it's not large these days, enterprises are complex. They have a lot of factors that need to be involved from security to installation, administrative rights, all these sorts of things. So you want to have assistive technology specialists that can speak the language for these various stakeholders, IT, HR and so on and so forth.

And that person needs to communicate clearly all the findings of a holistic assessment.

So...

The things, the kinds of things that go into an AT assessment are the employee's unique functionality challenges, and that's usually based on their medical diagnosis to start. You won't, we typically will assess what the goals and the objectives of their job are, what are their job task metrics, what are they expected to perform on a regular basis? So that's some consulting with the employee and often with

management on that. We want to review what are all the possible solutions available on the technical side.

So are these solutions built already into the operating system? There's a lot of features built right into the operating systems now, whether they be computer-based or even mobile. And we want to see maybe that's sufficient? And you know, an additional piece of software may not be necessary in a case like that. If there is and what third-party software and hardware is available from the assistive technology manufacturers that might best meet the employees needs. And then, how are we going to implement these?

So we touched on this a little bit, but, you know, who needs to be involved? And you really want to look at it kind of like a flowchart, step-by-step. What happens first? What happens second? When does it get installed? When does it get configured? When does training begin? All these sorts of things. Is accessibility testing necessary?

So on and so forth. This, all of this done up front alleviates that scenario that we role played, which is something being procured for presuppositions being made. And ultimately it's not the cart got a little bit before the horse in a situation like that. Then we also want to just determine if any additional testing is needed for accessibility as well.

And then we what we typically try to do obviously in our recommendations is scope out an initial amount of training and training is an ongoing thing and particularly when you deal with accessible technology. But a sufficient block of training. For instance, in our example it's very common where we will just get sort of an arbitrary number - 8 hours, 16 hours, 20 hours... and there really hasn't been any basis for assessing.

And typically it's much too low an amount of training hours.

Harris Rosensweig

So as Jeff was saying, this is not some cookie cutter approach. This is not some sort of checklist approach where we can take out a piece of paper and just assess someone based on "oh, you're blind" or "you're low vision" or "you have carpal tunnel" and you're going to get these things. Everything flows from a good assessment and having someone or a team of people who are in charge, who are knowledgeable, skilled in this particular area, are a lot of our experience working with big organizations.

One in particular, we work with a large federal agency with over 700 employees for over 11 years, where we're working with every possible disability you can think of. So when you're doing these kinds of assessments, you should be skilled in... a person who has skills with not only disability from a medical standpoint, but from a functional perspective. If I am blind or I have carpal tunnel, or if I have this

particular medical diagnosis, how does that affect my ability to do my job tasks at the expected level. The person needs to be very detail-oriented.

They have to do detailed job task analysis to figure out exactly all the different ways that these challenges that they're experiencing are affected. And then this person also needs to have in their mind a whole suite of of potential solutions, technical, non-technical strategies that could be employed based on their experience in the past with working with these types of disabilities.

They need to be a good communicator. You're dealing with IT people which are not always the most easy or friendly folks on the planet to deal with. And they also have to be able to communicate results of that assessment to the supervisor, to various stakeholders, and have the ability to assess how much training time is this person going to need realistically? So that they can pass that information on to whoever does that training.

Maybe it's themselves, but a very key component. So once we have all of these results, we've done a thorough assessment, we're able to generate a rapport that encapsulates all of this information, and then we're able to involve all the key stakeholders be it a supervisor, the IT person, maybe it's the reasonable accommodations coordinator, maybe it's even the 508 person or a subject matter expert.

So it really takes a team of people. Another question that we're often asked is how does this process change depending on the disability? Well, it really doesn't. We use the same process whatever kind of disability is involved. As Jeff mentioned, it's it's very thorough and we have a flow to that. So we're going to just jump right into this next role play example.

To try to illustrate all these various points that we brought over, kind of the feet going from the theory to the practice. All these these case examples we're giving our taken right from actual case examples that we have worked with. So in this particular one, I'm going to role play the supervisor calling up Jeff with a referral and some questions about an employee who has some issues. Okay.

So here we go.

Hello. Mr.. Ermold. I got your number from our reasonable accommodation coordinator and he said your organization could help us with an employee who is experiencing some work challenges.

Jeff Ermold

Okay, great. Thanks for calling. Well, tell me a little bit more about it. What kinds of trouble is he having?

Harris Rosensweig

His name is Jim, actually, and he's a good employee. He has been working as an Administrative Assistant for us for ten years. And I guess there's really two issues. We do have some medical documentation stating he was diagnosed with Diabetic Retinopathy. First, he's been having some some trouble with spelling and his typing rate is kind of decreased a bit and of course, he says he has been experiencing some vision issues, unstable issues with his vision.

We just could really use your help. What would you suggest?

Jeff Ermold

A couple of things here. Let's kinda take a step back a little bit. So what we first like to do is kind of start with a pretty comprehensive assessment looking at his challenges, his functionality based on some of the things you mentioned. I mean, I am hearing that the main issues are, I guess, of the efficiency in being able to keep up, struggling with, you know, being able to see as much of the screen and interact with it, and sounds like issues with typing and spelling.

Now, I know that it's said here that you were thinking about Zoom text and Dragon, and that is probably not a great scenario in this particular situation. And we'll talk through that exactly why. So really the key information that you told me here is Diabetic Retinopathy, and that'll kind of guide our analysis here. So let's kind of just step out of this role play for a second and kind of drill into that a little bit more.

Most times we're kind of called in at this level when there's a number of presuppositions that are kind of already made. So and so you can see that they've been made here. We do have information that was provided in a message that they were drawing a conclusion that because there is vision loss, the user would benefit from Zoom text and then Dragon would be the tool that they would use to assist with their spelling.

So this is kind of a checklist list approach. Those products can be used for those types of functions. Zoom text is a tool for for visual impairment, but Dragon is really not an ideal tool for this. And again, what we found is that this vision condition is progressive. So ultimately we're going to need to recommend some other things.

So let's kind of fast forward a little bit for the day when we are actually on site and we'll be working with the employee. The employee again, name is Jim. Harris. will be switching roles here a little bit and he will be being the assistive technology assessment, the specialist that will be coming in. And I'll be playing the role of Jim as the employee to be assessed.

Harris Rosensweig

Hi, Jim. Thanks so much for allowing me to spend some time with you today. It's so valuable that I'm able to actually witness you at your workstation with your various job tasks. And I think it would be just best for us to start in. If you could kind of take me through some of your job tasks so I can kind of learn and I can see some of the challenges that you're having.

And then while you're doing that, I can be thinking of maybe some potential solutions along the way. So if you'd be so kind.

Jeff Ermold

Sure, sure. Absolutely. Basically, I do a lot of administrative functions for the team. I've been here a long time, so I'm the lead administrative person for our department. And so this involves processing a lot of invoices. I deal with a lot of travel, a lot of travel expenses, receipts, those sorts of things. So, you know, in that case, I do I work in Microsoft Excel quite a bit.

That's become very challenging. I really can't keep track of where I am in the spreadsheet. But, you know, there's so many columns and I kind of lose... It's very tedious to find the information I'm looking for. I do travel expenses also planning. So I'm on the Internet, I do searches for flights and hotels and that sort of thing.

And again, that's a little bit... Webpages have become very cumbersome to kind of navigate and do my searching. I use Microsoft Word for some documents. We have some a couple of proprietary databases where I have to update everyone's schedules. So, you know, those are kind of the main things. I found that as my Diabetic Retinopathy has progressed, I'm having more and more difficulty even that I was just a few months ago.

So it's it's really hard. Like, I have difficulty finding the mouse pointer. I have trouble finding where the cursor is. Sometimes I'm trying to fill in a field in a form where I'm trying to make some corrections in a document, I'm having trouble putting in the right place. I have difficulty just reading. It takes me a long time.

My doctor did give me a couple things. He gave me some stronger prescriptions and I got like this hand-held magnifier which does help for small things. I can read a a letter or I use it at home more than anything, but I don't really feel that it's very effective. And I do have these larger monitors now, but again, it's only helped a little bit.

The biggest thing I'm having trouble with is typing. I actually never learned to touch type. I've kind of been hunting and pecking and cheating, kind of looking down at my hands all these years. So now I've found that because I can't see the keys that I'm pressing and I've never been a great speller that my spelling has really suffered.

And, you know, so my that's something that is important to my supervisor. Just, you know, clear communication and for professionalism. So, you know, I talked to the reasonable accommodations office and they're the ones that recommended Zoom text and Dragon for my particular situation. They did give me that larger monitor, monitor and but, you know, I'm really concerned. I mean, my output has really slowed and I really want to be, you know, efficient again.

Harris Rosensweig

Well, thanks so much. Jim. That was an excellent summary of your job tasks, the challenges. I know you have a meeting to get to in just a few minutes time, so I know we need to kind of wrap wrap this up soon. So some of the things that , excuse me, I would probably introduce to you are some things that are built into the operating system, something called Windows Magnifier. I think we can help you with several of the things associated with your vision.

And I'd also say that we would probably introduce you to something called speech output, a program called JAWS. But really primarily we need you to be able to learn how to type. It seems like you're hunting and pecking, as you say. We need you to learn how to type. You have a progressive vision loss and so these would be some of the major parts of our recommendations.

I know the reasonable accommodations coordinator had mentioned the Dragon Program, but there's a lot of tools that are built into Microsoft Office that can help you. But some of those are would be our major recommendations. I will want to probably want to ask you a bit more about your job tasks, but I know you're short on time.

Jeff Ermold

We're going to break out of this role play. I'll just flesh this out a little bit more. Basically, this is a very common scenario. And what happens in situations like this often is nobody's on the same page. So you might have a number of people in the loop from from employee to supervisor to reasonable accommodations office, so on and so forth.

But presuppositions have been made. And so now there's an expectation that all this can be accommodated with the Zoom text and the Dragon software and just a minimal amount of training. So that's really important to understand because when the expectations are set and then they are not the right expectations because the full assessment hasn't been done, then we kind of have to come in and backtrack.

And sometimes that can be a very challenging situation and the employee is put in a difficult situation. The key thing again here, it's a progressive eye condition, ultimately long-term. It's going to be a gradual transition from a visual output of information to an auditory output information and that's going to take quite a bit of time to learn to touch type and to learn a screen reader and all the commands involved with that.

But this will take away the strain and ultimately will make Jim much more efficient than he could ever have been trying to magnify screen content at such a large level. So, you know, but the expectations need to be adjusted and everyone involved needs to be informed that this is a long-term process. You know, we'll work coordinatedly step-by-step.

And that's really a better way to be. To have everybody in the loop and, you know, meet the employee's needs much, much more directly.

Harris Rosensweig

So we can see the importance of these of the technology assessment, the skills that are needed to carry out the holistic nature of it. And we hope that the two examples we've provided show that. Thank you.

Jeff Ermold

Thank you very much. We appreciate you attending. Again, I'm Jeff Ermold from a iYellow Access.

Harris Rosensweig

And I'm Harris Rosensweig. I'm the Director of Accessibility for iYellow Access.

Thanks again.

Bye.

- END OF TRANSCRIPT -