

A Model for Successful Assistive Technology (AT) Training

A Client's Perspective on the 25th Anniversary of the Easter Seals Massachusetts AT Program

Easter Seals is well known for its history of selling colorful stamps, but most people do not associate Easter Seals with assistive technology (AT) training. Actually, Easter Seals has AT programs in many states throughout the country. For example, this year marks the 25th anniversary of the AT Program managed by Easter Seals Massachusetts. This innovative program has provided life-altering AT training to many individuals living with disabilities in Massachusetts. As a former client of Easter Seals Massachusetts, I have first-hand insight into the monumental benefits that come from receiving services from this exemplary program.

Many articles about assistive technology focus on specific AT devices, but it's also important to highlight AT programs that provide invaluable training services to people with disabilities. The Easter Seals Massachusetts AT Program is a notable example of such a program. In this article, I will explain how the comprehensive teaching style of this program has had a profound and lasting positive impact on my life. I will also discuss some of the reasons why this particular program is so successful.

I'm a 47-year-old man with many of the limitations of a quadriplegic, as well as a visual disability. The Easter Seals Massachusetts AT Program has provided me with computer services that have enabled me to operate a computer profi-

ciently. My Easter Seals AT specialist, Eric Oddleifson, has given me extensive computer training, ranging from basic tasks, such as how to use Dragon NaturallySpeaking software to dictate in Microsoft Word, to specific disability-related tasks, such as how to obtain a book in digital format on Bookshare.org and use screen reading software to read it out loud. The latter training helped me to resume my college education after a 25-year medical leave of absence.

Eric has a positive approach to computer training that incorporates the use of workarounds and has completely reshaped my opinion of computer technology. The previous three companies that gave me training frequently told me, "You can't do that because you're disabled." Eric, on the other hand, has always said: "Let's create a workaround so that you can do that." I had never even heard of the term "workaround" until he introduced me to it. He has created so many successful workarounds for me that I now look upon any computer technology problem as a challenge that I can overcome, rather than an insurmountable obstacle.

Assistive technology has played an essential role in my successful training. Eric has installed an assortment of AT hardware and software to meet my disability needs. For example, since I am physically unable to restart my computer, he installed a SmartNav Head Tracking

Mouse by NaturalPoint (\$499, <http://www.naturalpoint.com/smarnav/store/catalog.html>) so that I have a hands-free method of restarting my computer whenever the Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice recognition software freezes.

Much of the training that I have received from Eric has focused on Dragon NaturallySpeaking Professional Edition by Nuance (\$599.99, <http://www.nuance.com/for-business/by-product/dragon/dragon-for-the-pc/dragon-professional/index.htm>), which is a vital assistive technology device for someone with mobility issues like me. I completely rely on this versatile voice recognition software to operate my computer. Eric has taught me how to fully utilize Dragon's wide range of features, such as standard voice commands for typing, Internet navigation, and mouse movement. He has also created numerous custom voice commands for my specific disability needs and has showed me how to create custom voice commands by myself.

This Dragon training has immensely expanded my computer capabilities so that I can now operate a computer almost as well as any other person. Having such a high computer proficiency has afforded me numerous opportunities to undertake productive endeavors, including a variety of employment opportunities. For instance, I have worked for my family's restaurant designing menus and flyers

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and I created its website. I have also worked as a successful seller on both eBay and Amazon and have sold many items.

Since utilizing the features of AT devices is often complex, Eric created many screenshot videos demonstrating how to perform specific AT-related tasks. This collection of tutorial videos serves as a valuable reference tool for those occasions when I forget how to do something. For example, some of Dragon's key features (such as creating a new backup voice file) only need to be performed periodically - so sometimes I have to refer to Eric's videos to refresh my memory. This library of videos is one of the ways in which my Easter Seals training continues to have a lasting positive impact on my life.

One of the most prominent examples of the lasting positive impact that the training has had on my life centers on my vocational aspirations. The astonishing level of independence that I have derived from my Easter Seals training has instilled in me a vibrant enthusiasm for assistive technology, which, in turn, has given me a specific vocational direction. I noticed that Eric dramatically improved my life by sharing his assistive technology knowledge and I wanted to do the same for other people living with disabilities. That's why I have dedicated my life to promoting assistive technology awareness. I have pursued this objective in a variety of ways, such as writing magazine articles about assistive technology. I have worked on AT projects as an Individual Consumer Consultant for the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. For the past several years, I have served as a member of the Massachusetts Assistive Technology Advisory Council. I also created a YouTube channel for the state's AT Program and currently work as the Outreach Coordinator for the Massachusetts Assistive Technology School Share Program.

My success story mirrors a plethora of stories about other Easter Seals Massachusetts clients. Like me, these clients have benefited from an AT Program staff member who has displayed an impressive knowledge of assistive technology and has incorporated workarounds into the training. The following Easter Seals

Massachusetts webpage contains a constantly growing list of such success stories: http://ma.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=MADR_AssistiveTechnologyClientStories. These stories exemplify the following assistive technology truism: Assistive technology can make possible, what once was impossible. Reading these inspirational stories will give you some understanding of the pivotal role that this Easter Seals AT Program plays in transforming the lives of Massachusetts residents.

The success stories feature people of all ages who share the same deep appreciation for assistive technology and for this remarkable AT Program. We can read about a woman with cerebral palsy named Allison, who began receiving AT services from Easter Seals Massachusetts as a teenager and went on to receive her PhD in economics from MIT. She uses eyegaze technology to accommodate her disabilities with speech and mobility. She is quoted as saying "Assistive technology can literally open doors. It enables me to show the world what I can do and allows me to live the life I want. I'm so thankful to Easter Seals and its services." Here is the link to Allison's success story: http://ma.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=MADR_AllisonThompkins

We can read about a teenager named Jonathan who cannot speak, walk or use his hands due to a childhood illness. His computer skills were greatly enhanced by the assistive technology services that he received from the Easter Seals Massachusetts AT Program. His mother is quoted as saying, "It's so amazing how much better he can communicate and navigate on the computer now." She goes on to say that, "Whenever I hear anything about someone needing assistive technology, I recommend Easter Seals." Here is the link to Jonathan's story: http://ma.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=MADR_Atech-Jonathan

We can also read about an elderly woman named Marlena who suffered a stroke and has no feeling in her left side. She received a computer and AT training from Easter Seals Massachusetts. The power of assistive technology is evident when she asserts, "The computer brought me



Allison is shown here proudly receiving her PhD diploma at MIT's graduation ceremony.

to life." She expresses her gratitude for the Easter Seals AT Program when she says, "Not only did I get a computer, Easter Seals let Art (an AT specialist) teach me and every time I need help, I know how to get it. I'm very, very happy." Here is the link to Marlena's story: http://ma.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=MADR_MarlenaATprofile

We can even see how assistive technology can open up new possibilities for recreational activities as we read Michael's heartwarming story. He is a 3-year-old boy that was born without arms. The Easter Seals Massachusetts AT Program provided him a variety of AT services, including a modified toy electric car that he can now drive, thanks to adaptations made to the car's steering wheel by a team of Easter Seals AT specialists. His mother says, "He loves the car." And she explains, "Easter Seals has changed his life." Here is the link to Michael's story: http://ma.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=MADR_MichaelPerrino

One of the reasons why this particular AT Program is able to provide services with such great success is because its knowledgeable staff has a very valuable resource called the Device Loan Program, which is managed by Easter Seals Massachusetts and is funded by the state's MassMATCH

Program. The Loan Program includes a Boston Loan Center that has hundreds of assistive technology devices that any Massachusetts resident can borrow, free of charge, for one month. The vastness of the Loan Center's inventory affords the AT Program staff with the opportunity to borrow many different devices and find something that successfully meets the client's disability needs. Since each client has his/her own individual set of disability needs and level of ability, this trial and error method of trying different devices is the ideal approach for achieving optimum results. Also, using a device for an entire month is extremely beneficial because a client often needs to use a device for an extended period of time in order to accurately determine whether he/she can operate the device effectively.

During my AT training, the Device Loan Program played a key role. My Easter Seals trainer borrowed more than a half dozen items from the Loan Center for me to try. I use Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice recognition software, which often has compatibility problems with other devices, so trying multiple devices was an essential step in my training process.

Another reason for this AT Program's success is the fact that the Loan Center is perfectly suited for the diverse clientele of Easter Seals because it contains a diverse collection of AT devices. There are devices to meet the needs of many different categories of disabilities, such as vision, hearing, mobility, speech communication and cognitive ability. Consequently, the AT Program staff are able to provide training with AT devices that match the disability of each respective client. I encourage readers to visit the Loan Center's online inventory (http://www.massmatch.org/inventory/search_inventory.php), which vividly illustrates how today's world of assistive technology includes devices to meet the needs of nearly every person living with a disability.

Over the years, I have gotten to know the President of Easter Seals Massachusetts, Kirk Joslin. Like his exemplary AT Program staff, he is a firm believer of the importance of assistive technology and is very dedicated to the AT Program. He has always been very supportive of the various AT projects that I have undertaken, espe-



Michael enthusiastically shows his steering wheel adapted electric car.

cially in 2009 when I won a national video contest for users of assistive technology. If you would like to see a demonstration of the AT devices that Easter Seals Massachusetts has given me training in, you can view my contest winning video by clicking this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2KxdCjRIZM>

It's important to note that this 2009 video contest exemplified the influence of Easter Seals AT Programs across the country because a fellow top finisher in this contest was a recipient of AT training services from Indiana's Easter Seals AT Program.

Kirk once explained to me that a key reason why the Easter Seals Massachusetts AT Program is so successful is because the members of the AT Program staff engage in team meetings for brainstorming purposes. The staff members share their assistive technology knowledge with one another, which enhances the capabilities of each member. They also discuss their client experiences. This means that they know how a colleague has successfully provided AT services to a client with a specific set of disability needs and, thus, are better prepared when faced with a similar client in the future.

As the Easter Seals Massachusetts AT Program celebrates its 25th anniversary, I am keenly aware that my success story would not have been possible without the AT training from this praiseworthy AT Program. I am appreciative of just how much this AT training has improved my life. I now approach my daily activities with confidence because I know that the computer skills and Dragon expertise that I have attained through Easter Seals have given me the ability to do almost anything that others can do. Thanks to this outstanding Assistive Technology (AT) Program, I'm proud to say that I'm now a productive member of society. I'm truly grateful that Easter Seals Massachusetts has lived up to its motto: "To provide services to ensure that children and adults with disabilities have equal opportunities to live, learn, work and play." ■