



Selecting and Obtaining Assistive Technology



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Technology has improved the quality of life for many people with disabilities. Assistive devices can help anyone at any age to read, hear, speak, write, learn, work, play, and participate in society. For example, Debbie, a fifth grade student born with cerebral palsy, communicates with her classmates and teachers through a “talking computer.” Pat, who uses a wheelchair, goes to work in her community’s lift-equipped bus. After a serious accident, Leland continues to farm with the aid of adapted equipment and artificial hands.

Assistive technology is defined as any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether commercially acquired, modified, or custom built, that is used to maintain or increase the functional capabilities of a person with a disability. In other words, assistive technology is any device that helps people with disabilities accomplish their goals and live more independently.



There are thousands of assistive technology devices on the market today. Selecting the right device with the best fit between the person, environment, and technology is a multi-step process that takes time. Consumers, family members, and professionals must carefully gather and evaluate pertinent information to make informed decisions. This is important because bad decisions can waste time, money, and patience. Poorly chosen equipment may be of little help to the user or, even worse, end up unused in a closet.

Getting Started

People with disabilities need to become advocates for their own needs. Professionals can recommend the kinds of devices that will help perform certain tasks; however, it is the consumer who will ultimately decide if a device works for him or her. The consumer must speak up if a device is not comfortable to use for any reason. It will be better in the end if opinions are expressed prior to the purchase. Complaining that a device doesn’t work as expected months after the device was purchased is upsetting for everyone.

It’s important to realize that sometimes the best technology solution is a simple solution. Consider environmental adaptations prior to purchasing any device. Environmental changes are long lasting and usually don’t require ongoing repair and maintenance. However, environmental changes aren’t the answer for all of the barriers people with disabilities face. After deciding that an environmental change won’t work, assistive technology may be the most practical option. This fact sheet provides general information to guide you through the selection and acquisition process. Good Luck!



Steps in Selecting and Obtaining Assistive Technology

1. Determine the Outcome

Define your main goal. What do you want to accomplish with the assistive technology device? What will the technology enable the user to do that he or she is currently limited in doing?

2. Complete Assessments

Next, determine the assessment team. Assessment is a complex task which requires input from the consumer, family members, school and medical professionals, co-workers, and caregivers. This includes anyone who will frequently work with the consumer or the technology. If funding is tied to educational objectives or medical diagnoses, there may be formal requirements that specific professionals be involved and certain documentation be obtained. Including the appropriate individuals on the assessment team is vital to a successful outcome.

Assess the Prospective Consumer

An assessment should include a precise measurement of the sensory, cognitive, and motor abilities and limitations of the consumer. What functions does the consumer need to perform, but is unable to? What type of assistance does he or she need? Physicians, teachers, therapists, and family members can provide valuable information about functional limitations and potential solutions.

Assess the Environment

Will the technology enable the consumer to achieve desired goals in all the environments where the technology is likely to be used? What other people will be interacting with the consumer and the technology in these various settings?

Assess the Available Technology

If choices are available, what device, adaptation, or system the best match with the needs of the prospective user and the environments in which he or she will function? Is there a low tech device which will adequately meet the consumer's needs? What types of high tech devices may help the person perform the task? Which device(s) allows the user the greatest independence? How long will it take to learn how to operate the device? If the device will be used in more than one setting, is it easy to transport from place to place? How safe is the device, both for the primary consumer, and for others who may work with it? Does the consumer feel comfortable with the way that the technology looks, feels, and sounds? How long lasting will this solution potentially be?



3. Choose a Device/System

The Utah Center for Assistive Technology (UCAT) and Access Utah Network have extensive information on a wide range of devices and adaptations. Their information specialists can discuss your needs with you and furnish information about specific devices and manufacturers. They may also be able to direct you to additional sources of information or to vendors in your area. UCAT has a variety of equipment in their office for hands on demonstration of devices, a computer center for citizens with disabilities, and assistive technology specialists.

Some Other Things to Consider when Evaluating a Device

Does this device represent the simplest, most efficient way to accomplish the task? Are there less expensive devices that serve the purpose as well? Does the device work effectively? Is the device convenient to use in the environment? Are different devices needed in different environments? Is the device safe to use? Does the device stand up well to normal use? Does the device have a warranty? Are sales and service people knowledgeable and helpful? Are repair services available and what do they cost? Does the manufacturer/dealer provide training? How much does it cost? Can the consumer operate the device with a minimum of assistance? Is the device attractive and will it fit into the consumer's lifestyle? Is it age, gender, and culturally appropriate? Will the device soon be outdated? Do the benefits provided by the device justify the cost? Is the device available for a trial period before purchase?

4. Select a Vendor

It is not enough that a particular vendor sells the piece of equipment being considered for purchase. If the equipment is purchased and then breaks down, dealer service becomes essential. An important consideration in buying equipment should be the dealer's consumer responsiveness, professionalism, and service.

Some Questions to Ask about the Dealer

How long has the dealer been in business? What is his/her knowledge of disabilities, and of the equipment being sold? How was that knowledge gained? Does that dealer participate in continuing education to stay current on new developments in technology and rehabilitation? How long has the dealer supplied the particular device? What is the dealer's responsibility if errors occur in measuring, ordering, assembling, or delivering the equipment? Does the dealer provide training or refer to other sources of training? Does the dealer carry professional liability insurance? Is the dealer willing to provide the names of previous customers using similar equipment as references? Does the dealer provide technical support for the device with a toll free number?

Some Questions to Ask about Service

Does the dealer have in-house service people and adequate parts inventory to locally provide service? What is the average or typical 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?



5. Seek Funding

The cost of assistive technology devices range in price from quite inexpensive to extremely expensive. For example, a wheelchair/seating system can cost as much as a car. Finding assistance with funding may take considerable time and effort, so you should begin to investigate funding sources at the same time you start looking at technology. The funding specialist at the Utah Center for Assistive Technology and the assistive technology coordinators at the Centers for Independent Living listed at the end of this document can help you locate potential funding sources.

Major sources of third party payments for the purchase of assistive technology may include private insurance, schools, early intervention programs, Vocational Rehabilitation, transition programs, Medicaid, Medicare, State Programs for Children with Special Health Needs, Centers for Independent Living, Division of Services to People with Disabilities, as well as other disability and service organizations. Determining which agencies you are eligible for, filling out the required paperwork, and monitoring the approval process takes time, patience, and attention to detail. It is critical to use the right words to suit the particular agency you are seeking money from. It's also important to be specific when you document the need for, and projected outcome of, assistive technology.

Funding Documentation should include:

- A written statement of medical need from physicians or other health professionals. If the consumer has had an evaluation from a rehabilitation professional, include this report.
- A description of the consumer's problems resulting from the disability. This description can come from the doctor or other professional who evaluated the consumer.
- A description of how the technology benefits or helps the consumer. Be sure to point out how money will be saved if use of the equipment reduces attendant care.
- A clear statement, based on assessment, that the consumer is a good candidate because he or she has the cognitive and physical capabilities necessary for using the technology.

It is very important to provide proper documentation and use correct wording and procedures when requesting funding. Initial requests for funding are frequently turned down, but appeals can be successful.

Purchasing used equipment can reduce costs. Access Utah Network has a list of used equipment for sale. UCAT and CILs have equipment available for short term loan. The Utah Assistive Technology Foundation has low interest loans available to purchase assistive technology devices and services. Contact information is included at the end of this document.

There may be costs beyond the price of the device itself that need to be considered. For example, software, upgrades, customization, maintenance, insurance, and training may all add to the price of the equipment. Beware of these "hidden" costs.



6. Determine Training Needs

The arrival of equipment is not the end of the process. The user, and anyone else who works with the device, should receive appropriate training. This may be provided by the dealer, a representative of the manufacturer, or a staff person from an educational or medical institution. Training ensures that the technology is used effectively, safely, and consistently in all relevant settings. Proper use and maintenance also minimizes the cost and inconvenience of breakdowns and repairs.



7. Conduct Follow-up

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

Considerations for Follow-up Evaluation

- Does the assistive technology permit the user to achieve the stated functional goals?
- Is the user comfortable and proficient with the technology, or making good progress in learning more complex technology systems? If not, what changes can be made to ease this process?
- Are equipment adjustments or additional training needed?



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

Considerations for Long-term Evaluation

- Have the user's abilities increased or declined in ways that affect the use of the technology?
- Is the individual functioning in different environments from those when the technology was first selected?
- Has the device developed problems that justify replacing it, or do newer versions have sufficiently greater capabilities or ease of use to justify a substitution?

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



For More Information

Utah Center for Assistive Technology
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888/866-5550
E-mail: tjackson@usor.state.ut.us
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Access Utah Network
155 South 300 West #100
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801/533-4636 (V/TTY)
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800/524-5152 (435) 797-1981 TTY
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6855 Old Main Hill
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Active Re-Entry
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Web: www.arecil.org

Options for Independence
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435/753-5353 (V/TTY)
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Also available in Braille, large print, audiotape, and disk formats.



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