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Communicators on the Front Line
by Sarah Blackstone, PhD

I asked some members of the newly formed AAC-RERC Writers Brigade to reflect on access issues that arise in their daily lives.

[Note: The AAC-RERC Writers Brigade is a NIDRR funded project with goals to expand dissemination activities of the AAC-RERC and develop employment capacities of individuals who rely on AAC by improving their technical writing skills.]

Johana Schwartz   Petaluma, California

I currently use an augmentative communication (AAC) device (Pathfinder by Prentke Romich Company). I have always used my AAC device as an interface to a computer, because I regularly rely on word processing and Internet applications. Sturdiness, reliability and compatibility are important access issues for me.

Sturdiness, reliability, and compatibility. The sturdiness of my equipment (AAC device, cables, T-Tam) is important because a variety of caregivers handle the components and set them up for me to use. The parts (wires, pins) need to withstand the wear and tear inflicted by my aides. The equipment also needs to be easy to assemble and user friendly, because most aides are not familiar with AAC technologies.

Reliability is another important consideration. I prefer to use a Macintosh because I have found it more reliable than my PC, which was subject to viruses and crashing. Unfortunately, my current AAC device, the Pathfinder, is not compatible as an interface with the new Macintosh operating system (OS). Finding compatibility is a work in progress. The Macintosh OS evolves and AAC devices evolve, but neither company assumes responsibility for maintaining the compatibility between them; and there is no third party who is committed to making it their business either. Computers are all moving to USB ports but AAC device makers are not, or at least not in a timely fashion. I have found someone involved in product development at the TRACE Research and Development Center and am now field testing an interface and working with Prentke Romich Company and TRACE to improve its functionality.

Wireless technology. Another important access feature for me is technology that serves multiple purposes and increases my self-sufficiency and mobility. The Pathfinder enables me to operate external devices and use environmental controls. Having wireless technology also means there are fewer components to set up.

Joe Hemphill   Fresno, California

The Message Mate (by Words+, Inc.) gives me quick access to neighbors and friends whom I don't see very often. One phrase I use when I go to church is, "May peace be with you." To access the prerecorded messages in the Message Mate, I use a finger on my left hand. For me, it is important to have messages that are personalized and that I can access quickly.

Personalizing, organizing, and using "quick" messages. Accessing the message "May peace be with you," does two important things. First, it lets others know very quickly that I know what is happening around me. Growing up with a speech disorder, I learned that some who heard me speak thought I was retarded. Second, I feel good being able to say nice greetings to others, because I enjoy people.

Since the Message Mate is a digitized speech device, someone has to record each message.

Much thought goes in to recording the messages. A friend and I spent hours planning how messages needed to be recorded and arranged so I can say what I want to say.

My Message Mate has 144 possible phrases. It contains four levels.

The first level has simple greetings such as "My name is Joe."

The second level has needs. For example, "I need cash from my ATM card."

The third is for emergencies, such as "Call 911."

The fourth is for miscellaneous phrases.

Sometimes accessing the desired phrase is difficult because I don't yet have a keyguard. A keyguard would possibly make me surer of myself using this device. Also, I have the Message Mate tied to my power chair, and I have to reach between my legs to pull it up into my lap to use it. While this is cumbersome, having a laptray or something similar would probably cause even more access problems.

Tom Younkerman   Denver, Colorado

I have a DynaVox 3100 (by Dynavox, Inc.) that allows me to communicate with others. I also rely on the computer (email) to communicate. Important access requirements for me are rate and being able to use my device in the community.

Rate enhancement, displays and mounts. The DynaVox 3100 has a flat touchscreen and I use my fingers to type what I want to say. I also use word prediction to speed up my typing. Communicating with an AAC device can be a slow process. Some people are patient, but others are not. I try to type what I want to say ahead of time, but that isn't always possible. I also store things that I say a lot, so I can just hit one or two buttons and speak the sentence. For example, when taking a bus, I can quickly tell the driver where I need to get off.

Unfortunately, the screen is hard to see outside and this makes communicating difficult, especially in direct sunlight. I have to move to a shady area before I can see the display to prepare a message. I think you can buy a tinted screen cover, but I haven't purchased one yet.

I use an electric wheelchair when I go to work and go out. Having my DynaVox mounted to the wheelchair enables me to access it wherever I go. The mount has a swing-away arm so that when I am not using it, I can put the device down by the side of my wheelchair. This is especially useful for getting close to a table or desk.

It would be helpful if I had a way to contact people when I am out, particularly if I get stranded. For me, a cell phone isn't practical, because I can't talk and trying to use my DynaVox with a cell phone would be difficult. There are pagers with keyboards for sending text messages. But how small are they and could I use them?

Tracy Rackensperger Maitland, Florida

Currently, I use an augmentative communication device (Pathfinder made by the Prentke Romich Company), a computer with an adaptive keyboard (Intellikeys made by Intellitools), a power wheelchair (Invacare) and a speaker telephone. The need to communicate and access technology is fundamental for my becoming a successful individual. The factors that influence my decisions about access technologies are: ease of access, speed, affordability and durability.

Ease of use, speed, affordability and durability. I need easy access because I am an

extremely independent person and do not want, nor do I need, help most of the day. Thus, I like to be able to roll up to a technological device and use it "on-demand" without needing an outside party to set it up for me every time.

Speed, the rate at which a technology can be used productively, quickly and efficiently, is another important factor when deciding on an access method. Besides being self-sufficient, I live quite a busy life. I need access methods that allow me to communicate promptly and to produce quality work.

Affordability is an issue when choosing access methods. In most cases, I am a self-payer for equipment. While Vocational Rehabilitation has paid for the more expensive devices I need (an AAC device and a power wheelchair), I pay for the "non-expensive" access methods.

The access solutions that work best for me are those requiring little setup and those with proven durability. Technology is amazing; and I have had very few issues receiving the adaptations I need to access it.

Summary

These individuals have written about issues they face accessing their technology and using it to engage people in their social circles and fulfill their professional and societal roles. Speed, rate, ease of use, compatibility, durability, sturdiness, reliability, personalizing messages, displays, mounts, and affordability are important to them.

Further thoughts

The lack of compatibility between AAC devices and computers, cell phones, PDAs, software, and other mainstream technologies is an ongoing problem. While everyone may well agree on the concept of universal design, technology keeps moving forward, old systems are not supported, and new systems offer options that people naturally want to access and use. AAC device manufacturers try to collaborate with and keep pace with the computer industry. However, this is next to impossible because consumer products are constantly changing.

The Trace Research and Development Center, the AAC-RERC and many others are participating in the development of interoperability standards. The goal of these standards is two-fold: (1) for people with disabilities to be able to operate any products they encounter and (2) for people to be able to connect their assistive technologies to any products they encounter. We've come a long way, but there is still a long way to go before people who rely on AAC devices can easily access most information technologies. [See www.tracecenter.org/world for more information about standards and progress toward solutions.]

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