

DISABILITY IN THE WORKPLACE

EMPOWERING STAFF IMPROVES MORALE AND PRODUCTIVITY

Advances in technology have liberated the disabled workforce and enabled more people with disabilities to play a full role in working life, as **Jo Faragher** reports

TECHNOLOGY

John Tipping is profoundly dyslexic and can read on average one word in ten. "Some days I read better than others, but on bad days I can't read at all," he explains. Since investing in screen-reading and transcription software eight or nine years ago, however, the way he runs his window film and sign installation company has changed dramatically.

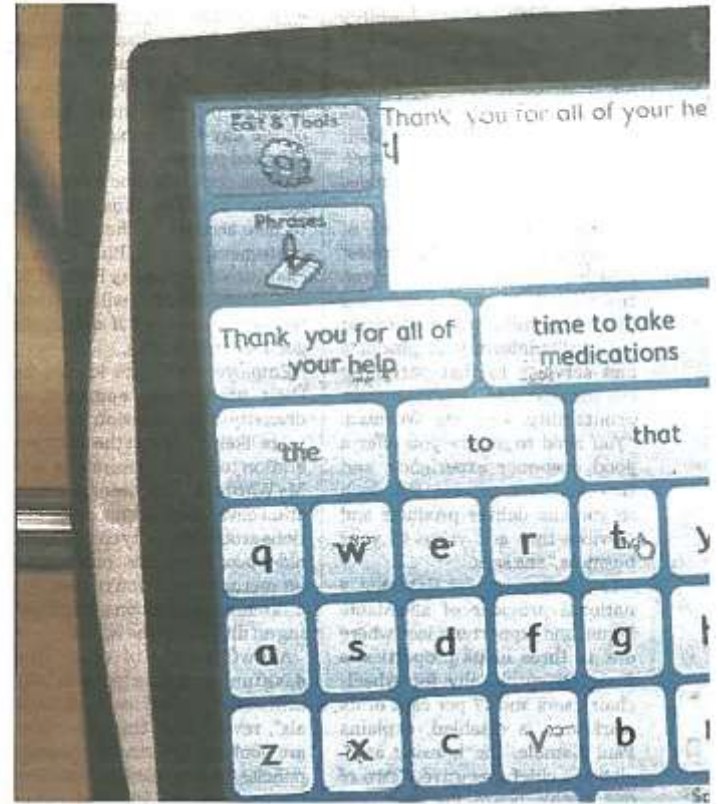
"Before I had access to the technology, my wife had to write all my emails, quotes and invoices," he says. "Now I use a program called Dragon NaturallySpeaking which writes all of this up for me. I've also got reading software that highlights what I'm reading. I press 'play' and it reads everything. I remember feeling really emotional when I sent my first email. It was so liberating."

Because he's out on-site a lot, he now also uses apps on his iPhone to send and read emails from customers, enabling him to get back to them much quicker, which in turn has helped his business to become more profitable. "Before I worked for myself, companies didn't want to invest in me because they thought that, because I couldn't read or write, I couldn't do the job," he recalls. "But it's just about having the right tools – it's like me telling someone to dig a hole for a sign, but not giving them a shovel."

As Mr Tipping's story demonstrates, investments in assistive technology (AT) can reap huge benefits in terms of productivity and engagement. While the range of products available can cover anything from screen-reading software to special purpose computers

with head-tracking devices, many employees with disabilities may only require small adjustments to existing systems. A change can be as simple as being able to alter the colour contrast on a Word document or a web screen for someone who has dyslexia.

Yet there can be reluctance among IT departments to make these changes because they fear they will disrupt their existing networks or compromise their security. "In many organisations, IT departments tend to lock down systems so users can't change them or introduce their own corporate branding or fonts," explains Paul Day, chief of staff at Business Disability Forum. "So much information now on corporate websites is via video, but few have subtitles for those with hearing impairments



of computer users are likely or very likely to benefit from the use of accessible technology

Source: Microsoft/Forrester



2,710

special aids and equipment have been provided through Access to Work government funding in the first four months of 2013

Source: DWP



£80,000

saving per employee to employers who retain staff if they become disabled

Source: BT

or audio description for those with visual impairments."

Thinking about who might be accessing a document or a website, or controlling a keyboard or piece of machinery, rather than assuming it will be someone with "eyes, hearing and arms", can make a major difference to a disabled person's ability to do their work, not to mention their confidence, he adds.

What's more, with an ageing workforce, employers will increasingly need to invest in technology to help their employees be productive. Problems, such as hearing and sight impairment, as well as musculo-skeletal problems, will become more commonplace.

"There will be an increasing number of people who need adjustments, who have the classic prob-



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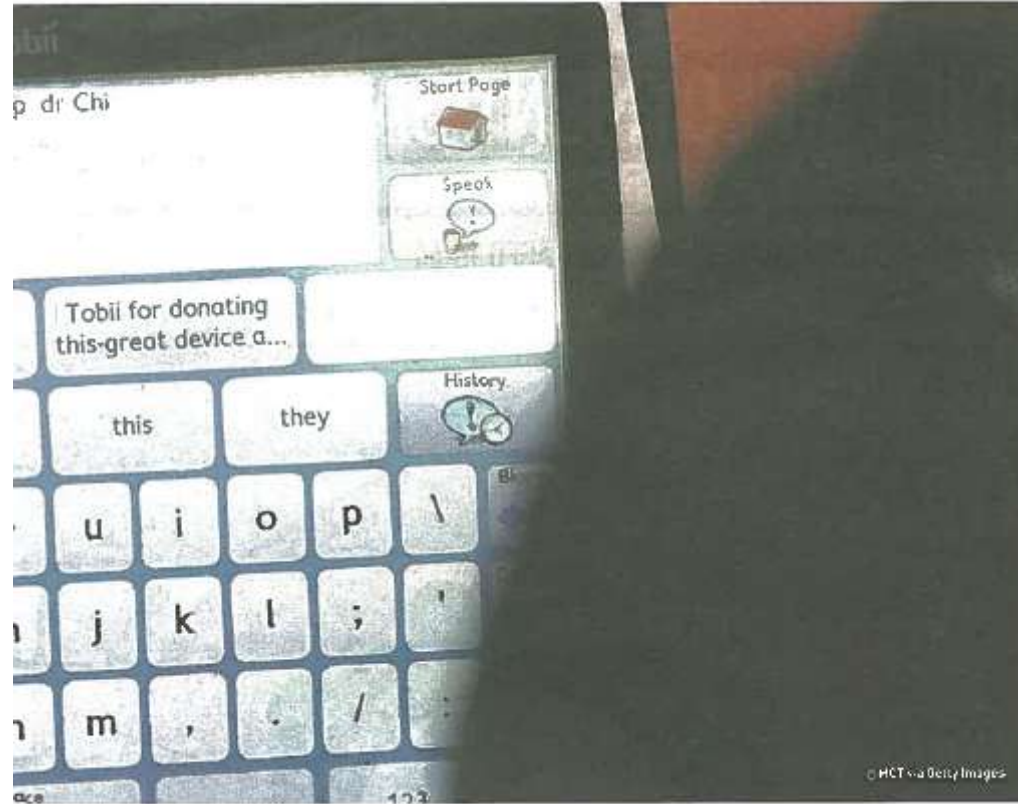
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blems associated with old age," says Dr Nasser Siabi, chief executive of Microlink, which works with organisations to come up with disability access solutions. "A wise employer will start putting provisions in place now to stop problems getting worse, rather than trying to fix the problem later. Preventative measures are far cheaper."

Often, the benefits of an investment in AT stretch beyond employees with disabilities. Dragon NaturallySpeaking, for example, is one of the most widely used pieces of software among lawyers, as it enables them to speed up the rate their words are transcribed; the simpler user interfaces and touchscreen technology on tablet computers make certain tasks easier for everyone, not just those with cognitive issues.

"In my dream world, there would be no such thing as AT, because it's a label," says Mark McCusker, chairman of the British Assistive Technology Association. "I think people should think about it as an extra tool that helps improve productivity and helps the workforce enjoy what they do."

Centralising the budget for AT, as they have at Lloyds Banking Group, can take the burden off individual line managers having to authorise purchases from their own departmental budgets and also increase buying power. After all, the legal obligation is with the employer, not the individual manager.

There is also funding available from the government, through the Access to Work scheme, although only a small percentage of the funding that has been given out to date has been allocated to technology spending. According to Mr McCusker, this accounts for only around £5 million of more than £100 million awarded so far, often because employers are either unaware of the support avenues

available or because they choose to avoid the paperwork and just buy the technology they need.

AT investments can also help to save employers money in the long term. Devices, such as the UbiDuo, a portable touchscreen device which helps hard-of-hearing and hearing people to communicate with each other face-to-face, can save thousands of pounds that might have previously been spent on British sign language interpreters, while remote-captioning services enable deaf staff to participate in meetings as every aspect of the conversation is written down.

In terms of managing the technology, increasingly sophisticated software management systems can help IT departments control all their AT centrally and push out specialist programs or updates to those who need them.

The growing trend towards employees bringing in their own devices to work has positive implications for those with disabilities too, according to Peter Johansson, chief executive of C Technologies, which produces portable pen-scanners that transmit handwritten text from paper to digital media.

"Mobile devices linked to work desktops, as well as peripheral assistive technology devices such as handheld scanners or recording devices, mean there are fewer bar-

riers for people with disabilities to overcome," he says. "Doing so also becomes much easier when people can incorporate the devices used in their personal life into their work."

Looking beyond the limited scope of the desktop computer also means disabled staff can work remotely - helpful if someone has an impairment that makes commuting difficult, for example, or needs to work in a solitary environment to aid their concentration. "Removing location boundaries is really important," says Jeff Willis, business solutions director at Toshiba. "All these things are issues employers should be looking at anyway now; it just happens that helping people with disabilities is a positive by-product."

Here lies the ultimate selling point of AT - that adapting existing systems or investing in specialist technology for those with disabilities can improve productivity across the organisation as a whole, which can only be good for business.

As Mr Day at Business Disability Forum concludes: "We're all 'situationally impaired' from time to time. So if you install a ramp at work, it doesn't just help the person in the wheelchair, it helps the guy who broke his leg in a skiing accident who's in plaster for two months and the woman with the pushchair. Many adjustments don't just help those with impairments; they help everyone." ■



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