

Pete's Story: Working with an Assistive Technology "Angel of Change"

by Peter G.

Age 42

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The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission enlisted the services of Easter Seals Massachusetts to provide me with extensive computer training. My Easter Seals computer trainer, Eric Oddleifson, installed voice recognition software and other disability friendly products. Thanks to his tireless efforts, we achieved a level of success beyond my wildest dreams. I'm now able to use a computer almost as well as an able-bodied person.

We utilized the following products:

1. Quartet Technology ECU (Environmental Control Unit) - a multifaceted AT product that can be operated by voice commands or by switch so that the user can control his/her hospital bed, bedroom lights, and infrared devices
(product video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cp_1xOQz92g)
2. Dragon NaturallySpeaking Professional Edition - a voice recognition software program (product video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3DhnpLIKCO>)
3. ViaVoice Professional Edition- a voice recognition software program
(<http://www.nuance.com/ViaVoice/>)
4. HandiEye - a hands-free mouse software program (www.abisee.com/hiddownloads). HandiEye is one of the only hands-free mouse software programs that does not require the user to wear any special headgear.
5. Logitech QuickCam - a web cam
(http://www.logitech.com/index.cfm/webcam_communications/webcams/&cl=us,en)
6. OmniPage - a text converter software program (<http://www.nuance.com/OmniPage/>)
7. Gorgy Clock - a Yahoo widget alarm clock software program
(<http://widgets.yahoo.com/widgets/gorgy-clock>)

I recently nominated Eric as one of my "Angels of Change". In my opinion, he is the quintessential computer trainer. He possesses all the qualities necessary to successfully train disabled people. During our training sessions he exhibited patience, perseverance, compassion, creative thinking, and diligence. It's obvious to me that working as an assistive technology specialist for Easter Seals Massachusetts is not merely his vocation; it's also his avocation.

My MRC rehab plan had reached a critical juncture when Eric entered the picture. My MRC counselor and my MOD advocate worked extremely hard to obtain a computer that would meet the needs of my multiple disabilities. But when the Dragon NaturallySpeaking trainer was unwilling/unable to create "workarounds" for my limitations, it seemed as though computer proficiency was going to remain beyond my reach.

Then, my counselor informed me that he was bringing in Easter Seals to do an evaluation. I told him that I was going to ask the Easter Seals computer trainer the same question that I had posed to the previous trainer. As soon as we met, I turned to Eric and said, "The previous trainer said that Dragon and ViaVoice have never been used together, so we can NOT try it. Do you agree with that?" Eric enthusiastically replied, "We could give it a try and see what happens!" I looked at my counselor and we both smiled because we knew that Eric was the right person to complete my training.

I was immediately impressed with Eric's undaunted determination. Whenever we faced an obstacle, he tried different potential solutions until he found one that worked. My previous computer trainers often gave up and simply said to me, "You can't do that because you're disabled." Eric, however, NEVER said that. He always said, "*Let's try to find another way for you to do that.*" His positive approach to computer training reminded me of the popular motto: 'Think about what you can do, NOT about you can't do.'

Eric always treated me with respect. I never felt self-conscious about my disabilities when we worked together. His friendly and easy going personality created a very comfortable working atmosphere. I felt that we were working together as a TEAM to overcome my limitations. He made my computer training not only productive but also enjoyable. Having a good working environment is an integral part for achieving maximum success and Eric was able to create such an environment.

His vast knowledge of assistive technology proved invaluable. The first obstacle that we faced was the fact that when the Dell computer's screen saver turned the screen off, Dragon could not move the mouse to reactivate the screen. I'm physically unable to move the mouse. However, I do have the Quartet Technology ECU which can control infrared devices. My MRC counselor purchased an LCD TV computer monitor for me. So Eric disabled the screen saver, which kept the screen on permanently. Now I simply use the Quartet ECU to turn the LCD TV monitor on/off.

One of the biggest weaknesses with voice recognition software is its inability to restart the computer. When Dragon was initially installed on my computer, it froze 3 to 4 times every day. With my disabilities, I can't physically restart the computer, so Eric and I devised *a COMPLETELY HANDS-FREE METHOD for restarting a computer* that could revolutionize the way that many severely disabled people use voice recognition software. We combined Dragon, ViaVoice, and HandiEye.

We interfaced HandiEye with my Logitech web cam. HandiEye uses infrared camera algorithms and moves the mouse correspondingly with face movements. (Please note: HandiEye can be used with any USB camera, but the camera should be capable of capturing 30 FPS (frames per second) at the lighting condition it is used in order for the software to function properly.)

This solution works to near perfection. Now, whenever Dragon freezes, I simply awaken ViaVoice from its sleep mode and use it to open the HandiEye program. Then I use HandiEye to navigate the mouse to go to the Start Menu toolbar and click "Start Menu," "Turn off computer," and "Restart," which automatically restarts the computer. Previously, I needed my parents to restart my computer over 100 times per month. Now I only need their assistance less than once a month.

I have a large-screen monitor, but with my visual disability - reading small font on web sites caused eye strain. Eric downloaded a Web browser called Mozilla Firefox which allows the user to instantly magnify font size on web pages. Now I experience eye strain much less often while surfing the Web. We even created Dragon customized commands that I use to find the desirable font size by saying "Make bigger" or "Make smaller".

I often used Dragon to read out loud to me Word documents and web site passages. But, unfortunately, Dragon can't read scanned pages. Consequently, I couldn't use Dragon to read books out loud. Eric installed a software program called Omnipage which converts scanned pages into Word document form. By scanning book pages with Omnipage, I'm able to use Dragon to read books out loud to me. Currently, I'm reading a very inspirational book entitled "Happy To Be Alive" by quadriplegic former NFL football great Darryl Stingley. Interestingly, Mr. Stingley purchased a Quartet Technology Environmental Control Unit on the same day that I did 9 1/2 years ago.

Eric created many Dragon customized commands that improved Internet navigation, mouse movement, and dictation. You can read about these commands and other workaround techniques we devised, by clicking the link below to my recently published magazine article: http://occupational-therapy.advanceweb.com/Editorial/Search/AViewer.aspx?AN=OT_08feb4_otp40.html&AD=02-04-2008

YouTube.com has a wide array of demonstrational videos of AT products. In the near future, I plan on posting some videos demonstrating many of the techniques that we developed.

Eric's thoroughness was a huge asset during my training. We overcame dozens of obstacles. He even downloaded a free software program called the Gorgy Clock that features an alarm clock that sounds for 20 seconds and then automatically shuts off. It was very gratifying to finally use an alarm clock again after a nearly 20 year hiatus.

Even after my computer training ended, he continued to make a difference in my life. I contacted him and told him that I planned on writing to hospitals and physical rehab centers throughout the country, so that I could share my assistive technology knowledge with other members of the disabled community. He pointed out that I could reach a mass audience by publishing a magazine article. He gave me the name of a magazine called Advance and I submitted an article. The editor liked it and published it in February.

My MRC counselor read the article and submitted it to the MRC Newsletter which published it in March. My counselor also suggested that I become an Independent Consumer Consultant (ICC) for Mass Rehab. I'm pleased to say that I just became an ICC and will be writing articles in the ICC Newsletter.

My experiences with Eric taught me that a person's achievements with assistive technology are often dependent upon the amount of knowledge that one has. Writing for the ICC Newsletter gives me the means to increase other people's knowledge and thereby, help them better utilize assistive technology.

My success story is a testament to Eric's commitment to the client, his expertise in assistive technology, and his humanity. I firmly believe that many future Easter Seals clients will consider him an Assistive Technology "Angel of Change" just like I do.