Written evidence to the Work & Pensions Select Committee Assistive Technology Inquiry

January 2018

Submitted by:

Nigel Lewis, Chief Executive, AbilityNet
Email: nigel.lewis@abilitynet.org.uk
Tel: **0800 269 545**

Executive summary

- Technology of all types can play a vital role in removing many of the barriers that disabled people face in the workplace, but we need to recognise that assistive technology now includes a huge range of options and adjustments that can be made to commonplace computers and smartphones – and that there all sorts of free or low-cost mainstream solutions available.
- As well as specialist assistive technologies the latest mainstream technologies can now meet the needs of many disabled people, and emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence are bringing solutions such as voice recognition devices that can are considered mainstream but can be of huge value to many disabled people.
- What is clear from AbilityNet's work is that giving disabled people access to the correct assistive technology means they will succeed in their role. Whether they require specialist assistive technology solutions or simple adjustments to existing systems, the right tech can level the playing field for disabled people. It can help

people feel and become more independent, make them much more productive and stay longer in their role.

- As technology continues to develop at an astonishing pace there is a need for much greater understanding of how technology can meet the needs of disabled people in the workplace.

- As well as personalised support and advice for the employees themselves too many employers, managers and colleagues are not aware of the solutions available and do not see the huge value they can gain by employing a disabled person.

- A key challenge in making the best use of assistive technologies is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, the workplace technology needs of one disabled person will vary vastly to the next person as their place of work and duties will be different.

- AbilityNet provides free information and expert resources to identify technology options available, and our award-winning tool 'My Computer My Way' which shows how to make the relevant adjustments on any mainstream computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone was used half a million times in 2017.

- There is a role for Government in promoting a broader understanding of assistive technology – moving from a narrower definition from a previous technological age to a much broader picture that encompasses mainstream technologies as well as rapidly emerging technologies such as AI.

- The Government needs to enforce the Equality Act 2010 and the requirement for employers to make reasonable adjustments. This legislation is well-established, can easily be adopted by employers of any size but could be given more emphasis when promoting diversity in the workplace. The compliance and legal risks are significant when weighed against the costs of implementing reasonable adjustments – especially when employers understand that it may not require costly specialist equipment.

- Disabled people would benefit from a more market-led approach from the provision of assistive technology, which would drive up product innovation, improve the quality of the technology assessments and increase the speed of service delivery. Greater competition in the provision of the assessments, technology, training and advice would be a more effective way of ensuring that the disabled person and their employer has the best overall provision.

About AbilityNet

- AbilityNet is a UK charity that helps older people and disabled people of all ages use technology to achieve their goals at home, at work and in education. We provide a range of services that include personalised workplace and education assessments, digital accessibility testing and computer support in people's homes. We also offer a wide range of free expert resources, including a technology information helpline which receives over 1000 calls and 500,000 website visits from disabled people, carers and employers each year.

AbilityNet written evidence to the Work & Pensions Select Committee Assistive Technology Inquiry, January 2018

1. What role can assistive technology play in removing barriers to work and helping disabled people stay in work?

AbilityNet is a UK charity that helps disabled people use technology to achieve their goals at home, at work and in education – providing specialist advice to identify each person's needs and select the appropriate technology.

Established in 1998 with support from IBM and Microsoft AbilityNet helps people with any disability of age and can recommend any type of technology. In the past four years we have provided direct support to over 6,000 adults in the workplace, as well as more than 7,000 HE students, many of whom will now be in the workplace.

As well as more traditional assistive technology solutions, we know that simple changes to existing systems can help level the playing field, help people feel and become more independent, make them much more productive and stay longer in their role.

Until recently assistive technology was a specialist field of tech development, with a range of smaller suppliers developing bespoke solutions for specific users – often at significant cost to the user or whoever is funding them.

The past ten years has seen a significant shift in this picture, especially with the development of smartphones and portable devices. All mainstream computer systems can now deliver huge benefits to disabled people, often requiring simple adjustments to options that are built in.

Whatever the available technology our mantra is that one size NEVER fits all.

Our specialist service is to assess each person and provide personalised recommendations, drawing on our knowledge of the many current solutions. Every person, every role, every workplace, every situation may require a different mix of adjustments and suitable technology.

A salesperson with dyslexia travelling between appointments may rely wholly on their phone to access emails, whereas an operations manager with dyslexia using a desktop computer may require a very different solution.

We also know that many of the barriers that people face are cultural, not technical.

Too many employers, managers and colleagues are not aware of the solutions available and do not see the huge value they can gain by employing a disabled person. Giving disabled people access to the correct assistive technology means they will succeed in their role, which in turn raises awareness, challenges prejudices, promotes inclusion and encourages diversity in the workplace.

Changes in technology are happening everyday, with new releases of operating systems, new apps, and new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) creating amazing new opportunities for disabled people.

As well as one-to-one advice, AbilityNet also provides free information and expert resources on our website to identify options, and our award-winning tool My Computer My Way shows how to make the relevant adjustments on any mainstream computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone. It was used half a million times in 2017, with popular pages including:

- how to make the type bigger on an iPhone – to help people with visual impairment
- slowing down your mouse in Windows 10 - very helpful for people with Parkinson's
- inverting colours on an Android screen – helpful for people who are colourblind.

Once again, a key barrier is not knowing what your existing system is a capable of, which adjustments would be relevant, or which menu to use to make that adjustment.

Two examples demonstrate our approach to using technology to support disabled people in the workplace:

We have a team of workplace assessors who are commonly asked to assess people with RSI. Whatever the cause of the pain most people with RSI will find it difficult to use a mouse, so we often suggest that they switch to an upright mouse - for which there are a range of options on the market.

However, it may also be useful to make use of the built-in voice controls – or they can avoid a click on the mouse by learning keyboard shortcuts or switching to a touchscreen to perform certain tasks to help alleviate fatigue.

We also see many people with dyslexia, or similar symptoms which can often be undiagnosed. Overcoming daily challenges with reading and writing can cause stress and slow down productivity. As well as specialist spellchecking software, every type of current computer system now has high quality dictation software built in – enabling people to dictate their emails or documents.

Most computers also include screen-reading software – reading back messages and documents with built in commands to control speed and language. The latest AI solutions such as Microsoft's Seeing AI can now read out text and even translate on demand – converting a picture of text in one language into spoken words in another language.

2. How should the Government support the development of this technology, and are there any particular innovations it should look to support?

There are two clear ways that the Government can play a very positive role in promoting the development of assistive technology in the workplace – we would characterise this as the carrot and the stick.

The carrot is continuing to raise awareness amongst employers of all sizes and in all sectors that building a more diverse and inclusive workforce makes sound business sense. Every employer wants a more productive, more engaged, more loyal workforce, with a broad range of experiences, skills and knowledge and a culture of support and inclusion across all levels of management.

Supporting staff with disabilities is just one aspect of this positive approach and requires employers to understand people's needs at every stage of their employment journey – creating a level playing field at the recruitment stage to make sure they recruit the best person for the job to training and support for managers to enable them to get the best form their teams.

The Government already works with business to help set this positive agenda but still more can be done to underline the advantage that diversity and inclusion brings to UK plc.

This includes a role in promoting a broader understanding of assistive technology – moving from a narrower definition from a previous technological age to a much broader picture that encompasses mainstream technologies as well as rapidly emerging technologies such as AI.

AI is a great example of how the best solutions for disabled people may not come from the specialist assistive technology sector. Voice recognition built into Amazon Echo devices - or Microsoft's Cortana, Apple's Siri or the Google home devices – are seen as a convenience for many of the millions of people who use them every day. But using your voice to create a to do list or send an email could transform the life of someone who has a stroke and would be equally valuable people with dyslexia, a blind person or someone who has Parkinson's.

We see these devices as home entertainment but they are introducing mainstream technologies that will change all aspects of our lives, including the workplace. They may not be seen as assistive technology but it is vital that the Government sees these sorts of technologies as part of solutions that it promotes.

The Government also has a stick in the form of the Equality Act 2010 and the requirement for employers to make reasonable adjustments. This legislation is well-established, can easily be adopted by employers of any size but could be given more emphasis when promoting diversity in the workplace.

The compliance and legal risks are significant when weighed against the costs of implementing reasonable adjustments – especially when employers understand that it may not require costly specialist equipment.

A particular barrier faced by many employers is identifying the individuals who may need their help. Only 8% of the millions of disabled people in the UK are in a wheelchair and too many people do not reveal their needs for fear of discrimination. Employers face legal cases for failing to make adjustments, but may feel trapped by the fact that they can't identify the people who need help.

This is why AbilityNet has helped develop software that can overcome these barriers and help employers of all sizes identify needs across their workforce. Clear Talents is an example of the way that technology can address systematic barriers and embed best practise. Every employee is encouraged to use an online system which asks about their day to day needs, without labelling anyone as disabled. It also takes account of all nine of the protected characteristics identified in the Equality Act.

This system has already been used by over 25,000 people in companies of all sizes – from SMEs to a business with 25,000 UK-based employees. Of those people 60% needed some kind of Reasonable Adjustment - half of those adjustments were dealt with by existing support systems, 40% needed only informal intervention from their manager to acknowledge their needs and 10% needed further specialist intervention such as Occupational Health, assistive technology or other external specialists.

What is striking about these numbers is that most employers are working at disclosure rates of 2 or 3% - identifying just a tiny fraction of the people who could require support and with no systematic way of preventing discrimination.

If that is scaled up to the 30m adults in the UK workforce it could be that as many as 3million adults currently need specialist intervention and recommendations for some kind of assistive technology. Whatever system is used, and whether the Government adopts a carrot or stick approach this illustrates the way that innovative technology can play a role in delivering the Government's existing legislation.

3. Is Access to Work the most effective means of providing access to assistive technology? Should other funding models be considered?

Access to Work is not the most effective means of providing access to assistive technology for disabled people. The scheme is only really for people once they are in work – and workplace assessments can only be made once an individual has a job offer. The real challenge is disabled people's ability to find work in the first place and the use of technology is critical in this day and age.

Ensuring that disabled people have access to information on employment opportunities is vital. As much of recruitment is now online, the persistent inaccessibility of recruitment websites and online application systems remains a big barrier for disabled people looking for a job.

Over 90% of websites, for example, don't even meet single-A compliance with the WCAG guidelines set by the World Wide Web consortium, with the legal minimum being AA. AbilityNet called on Government to enforce the legal requirement for website sites and applications to be accessible in an open letter. A high-profile shift to enforcement of the legislation would hopefully have a significant impact on the landscape.

We need to provide disabled people who are actively seeking work with the same support as if they are in work, the Access to Work scheme does not currently do this.

In terms of funding assistive technology for disabled people, or the Access to Work scheme, we believe that disabled people would benefit from a more market-led approach with a variety of suppliers (rather than one or two large contract holders), which would drive up product innovation, improve the quality of the technology assessments and increase the speed of service delivery.

Greater competition in the provision of the assessments, technology, training and advice would be a more effective way of ensuring that the disabled person and their employer has the best overall provision.

AbilityNet would welcome the opportunity to provide further oral evidence to the Work & Pensions Select Committee.

Ends.

[WORD COUNT 2390]