



Introduction

The field of assistive technology is becoming more visible in society. The term 'assistive technology' is appearing in popular periodicals and in newspapers. The needs of people with disabilities are becoming more visible, at the same time as the baby boom generation is addressing functional impairments in their parents and in themselves.

The increased visibility of assistive technology — and the market opportunities generated by the corresponding demographic imperatives — are causing more business and government entities to enter the field. Some believe they are establishing the field with their entry. Of course, the field is already well established, and is even structured in a fairly coherent fashion. However, a newcomer may miss the structure because it is comprised of a wide range of activities, a diverse nomenclature, and a bewildering array of acronyms. In the worse case, new investments are not linked to the existing infrastructure. This is an opportunity cost the field can ill afford to sustain.

Providing an overview of the programs and players within the field of assistive technology, requires an investment of time and the compilation of information from multiple sources. A current snapshot of the most relevant activity is the most efficient way to introduce the field.

This issue provides such a snapshot. It focuses on brief summaries of the organizations and programs currently participating in the field of assistive technology. These organizations include government departments, universities corporations, professional associations and consumer agencies.

The articles focus on North America, both the United States and Canada. A future issue will contain similar summaries for Europe, Australia and the Far East.

The first article addresses the US federal departments supporting programs in assistive technology. William Newroe introduces readers to a dozen federal agencies, and several dozen programs within those agencies. He also describes two inter-agency programs that are very relevant to the field, the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program, and the Federal Laboratory Consortium. Every program contains a brief description, contact information and — as a sign of the times — a World Wide Web address for further reference. The array of programs demonstrates the government's commitment to meeting the needs of people with disabilities.

Brian Kon provides a profile of the private sector, the most essential yet least understood sector in the field. The private sector consists of the corporations that manufacturer, distribute, sell and support the assistive technology devices and services in the marketplace. There are over 2500 companies in the field generating hundreds of billions of dollars in devices and services annually. He also describes the trade associations, the key points of contact for accessing these companies, their products and the tradeshow at which new products are unveiled. Although most of the companies described operate primarily in North America, many have a presence around the world.

How do people become qualified to practice within the field of assistive technology? Various

disciplines offer education programs that result in either course exposure, or in formal degrees specializing in the field. James Lenker is well qualified to summarize these education programs, since he holds professional degrees in both mechanical engineering and occupational therapy. He thoroughly presents the programs leading to degrees or certificates. He also lists programs that have a coursework concentration in the field of assistive technology. Readers can find appropriate programs for enrollment, recruitment or collaboration.

Professional associations exist to support people who have dedicated their careers to serving the needs of people with disabilities. The medical, engineering, rehabilitation, therapy and education fields are all represented. These associations provide licensure or certification, quality assurance and continuing education to their members. They communicate through journals and newsletters, and conferences. One organization, the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA), offers a forum that crosses the boundaries of all professional disciplines. Jennifer Weir presents all the essential information for these professional societies. As noted previously, most have World Wide Web sites for ease of reference.

The professional society RESNA offers a formal credentialing program for people working in the field. People can take an exam to become certified as assistive technology practitioners or as assistive technology providers. Anjali Weber ex-

plains what the credentialing program is, why it exists, and what the reader needs to do to pursue credentials within the field. The RESNA exam is offered several times per year through major national conferences.

In addition to the government, educational, professional and business participants, the field of assistive technology also boasts strong representation and participation, by the end-users of assistive technology. Ernest Churchwell describes the US organizations operated by and for people with disabilities, which fund or otherwise support research and development. Some organizations address specific disabilities, while others address age groups. Collectively, they give a voice and presence to the tens of millions of people who need the functional capabilities provided by assistive devices.

An overview of North America requires a thorough representation of organizations and programs in Canada. Deborah Finn delivers with a summary of the most relevant programs from the government, research, business and consumer sectors. Collectively they are engaged in a high degree of cross-sector collaboration. Companies and individuals interested in doing business in Canada will find the guide invaluable.

Collectively, the issue should provide some additional guidance to companies and individuals interested in accessing the field of assistive technology.

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