



# DEI *Perspectives*

## National Assistive Technology Awareness Month – November 2024

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“Hey Google, turn on bedroom lights.” Did you know that this phrase can turn your smart home device into assistive technology for those who may have a mobility impairment? Not sure how to get to your new doctor’s office? Open your Waze app, type in the address and *boom*...your GPS has now become an assistive technology device. Do you have a hearing impairment that makes it hard to hear the local news on your TV? Turn on closed captions and watch as your TV turns into assistive technology!

Many people assume that assistive technology (AT) are expensive devices such as wheelchairs, hearing aids or even chair lifts, but many things can be AT – it just depends how they are used. AT is any device or tool that is used to simplify someone’s life, help them be more independent, remove barriers for them or improve their overall quality of life. AT devices and services allow people to work, attend school, interact in social settings and live in the communities of their choice. A device or tool is NOT considered AT if it is simply used because you like or enjoy it.

According to The World Health Organization (WHO):

- Most people who use assistive technology (AT) use more than one product.
- With an ageing global population and a rise in noncommunicable diseases, an estimated 3.5 billion people will need AT by 2050.
- Of the 80 million people who need a wheelchair, only 5-35 percent have access, depending on the country in which they live.
- Globally 1.5 billion people have hearing loss, yet hearing aid production currently meets less than 10 percent of the global demand.

As you may suspect after reading these statistics, there are many barriers impacting access to AT such as high costs, limited physical access, insufficient funding, procurement challenges and



sociodemographic obstacles. It is staggering to know that as few as three percent of people in some low-income countries have access to AT in comparison to 90 percent in some high-income countries (from The WHO and UNICEF Global report on assistive technology, 2022).

AT dates to 1874 when the Audiophone Bone Conduction Amplifier was created. This device replaced the use of a cone in the ear to improve hearing. On January 30, 1928, the American Foundation for the Blind distributed radios to help blind people more readily access information and in July of 1991, Smart Board technology came to the



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market and revolutionized how children learn, including those with behavioral difficulties or autism spectrum disorders.

United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) is an organization that operates in every state and offers a variety of AT services and programs that support people's ability to live with a greater degree of independence. One program offered is AgraAbility PA, which supports agricultural workers with disabilities or long-term health conditions who are looking to remain active in agriculture. They also offer Changing Hands, which is an equipment reuse program for AT and adaptive equipment for individuals who may not be able to afford or obtain services. With this program, all equipment is offered free of charge. And in Pennsylvania, a partnership with TechOwl at the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University allows family members to borrow AT on a trial basis to see if these items will work for their needs.

We encourage you to learn more about AT and how it helps people live a better quality of life. Happy National Assistive Technology Awareness Month!