Chapter 21
Assistive Technologies and Computers: How to Find a Perfect Match to Help People with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (WHO, 2001) provides the term disability as a part of the multi-aspects of the interaction between the individual and social environmental context in which it operates. Therefore a disabled person is a person who has impairment, activity limitation or participation restriction. A person in this situation can present difficulties in occupational performance. It is necessary to develop a set of resources, technological or otherwise, to offset these difficulties, decrease the distance between exclusion and participation and contribute to the integration of people with functional diversity in society. These resources are called support products or technology support, but do not eliminate the deficits, they can eliminate the limitation of the performance of persons with disabilities.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8828-5.ch021
INTRODUCTION

As individuals and members of a social community, people need to carry out a series of activities in order to maintain their habits and roles, as well as balance in different areas of performance.

On occasions, people may have either temporary or permanent disabilities that affect their abilities and reduce their possibility to performance activities, as a result of one or more alterations in their functions and/or bodily structures (World Health Organization, 2001).

Spanish Law 39/2006 on the Promotion of Personal Autonomy and Attention for Persons in a Situation of Dependency defines the concept of autonomy as “the ability to control, confront and adopt, on one’s own initiative, personal decisions regarding how to live according to one’s own standards and preferences, as well as to carry out the basic activities of daily life”.

Two conclusions may be derived from this definition: the individual is an agent of their own personal actions (self-governance), and gradually acquires autonomy through their personal development. So person who has personal autonomy is able to take his/her own decisions.

Focusing on this meaning, functional deficit does not imply, in itself, any reduction in the person’s degree of autonomy. This concept goes beyond bodily structures or functions, and belongs to the intellectual sphere of the individual, constituting the capacity for decision, awareness of oneself, and self-governance (ASEM Federation, 2008).

However, the presence of functional deficits may lead to limitations in a person’s activity if they do not have the suitable resources available to overcome this situation. Finally, if society is not prepared to include persons with some type of limitation in its activities, due to the presence of a deficit, and does not develop or apply the necessary instruments to ensure their participation in a situation of equal opportunities, then a situation known as restriction in participation may occur (World Health Organization, 2001).

As a result of the appearance of this social restriction, the individual experiences a major reduction in their level of personal autonomy. In other words, the person has sufficient self-governance to choose or decide what they want to do (when, how, where, with whom), but the obstacles or impositions of the environment (whether these are physical, social, cultural, spiritual, virtual, temporal or even personal) constitute a genuine impediment to the full development and participation of the person.

Faced with this situation, there is a need to develop a series of resources – technological or otherwise – that make it possible to compensate for these difficulties, reduce the distance between exclusion and participation, and contribute towards the integration of persons with functional diversity into society as capable and self-governing citizens.

And so, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, there has been a genuine technological revolution, leading to the development of different devices, tools, resources and solutions aimed at achieving this objective.

The term “Assistive Technology” was proposed in the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988, although the concept, under a series of guises or none in particular, long predates this legislation (Scherer, 2001).

In order to achieve more independent functionality and to compensate limitations in activity caused by some type of deficit in bodily structures and/or functions, people with functional diversity require different types of assistance. This support is necessary in different personal spaces and surroundings, such as the home, school, workplace or leisure areas in the community.

A wide range of resources exists for promoting personal autonomy, and may involve assistance from a third person (a family member acting as a carer, or a paid personal assistant), a guide dog, or assistive technology (Scherer, 2001).
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