Selecting Assistive Technology

For persons with a disability or those experiencing the effects of aging, assistive technology (AT) devices and services can be the key to greater independence and productivity. An AT device is any item used to maintain or improve a person’s functional capabilities. An AT service is any service that helps an individual select, acquire, or learn to use an AT device.

Selecting assistive technology involves following a process which results in finding the “best fit” between person, environment, and technology. Prospective end-users of AT devices and those assisting them must carefully evaluate information and make informed decisions. Using a process for device selection is important because it decreases the likelihood of bad decisions that waste time, money and patience. Poorly chosen equipment may be of little help to the user or even end up unused in a closet.

Considerations for Selecting Assistive Technology

Define Your Goal—What do you want the AT to accomplish?
What does the individual want the AT help them do? This defines the critical “feature match” between the end-user and the technology.

Consider the AT Team
Selecting an AT device requires input from the individual who is going to use it. It may also require input from family members, educational, medical and vocational professionals, co-workers, and caregivers. A good rule of thumb is to include anyone who frequently works with the end-user or the technology.

There may be formal requirements for team membership and documentation if funding is tied to educational or employment objectives or medical diagnosis. Having appropriate individuals on the AT team is vital to a successful outcome.

Consider the End-User
The individual’s abilities and limitations, as well as, what assistance or accommodations are needed in sensory, cognitive, and motor areas is necessary.
Consider the Environment
Will the technology help the individual achieve the desired functional goal? Who will be interacting with the person and the technology in the environments?

Consider the Technology
What device, adaptation or system is the “best match” for the identified needs and environments?

Device Factors to Consider:
Is the end-user comfortable with the way that the technology looks, feels, and sounds? Is it age, gender, and culturally appropriate? Is it easy to use?

Which device allows the greatest independence? Is it easy to transport from place to place? Does it require training prior to use? If training is required, where and how can one obtain it? What will it cost? Does the device pose any safety risks to those that may work with it?

Is the device reliable and durable? How and where are necessary repairs done? How difficult and time-consuming is it to obtain service?
Considerations when Selecting a Vendor
It is not enough that a particular vendor sells a piece of equipment that an individual needs. The dealer’s consumer responsiveness, professionalism, and service orientation should be a part of the decision process.

Questions to Ask the Vendor
How long has the vendor been in business? How long has the vendor supplied the device you are interested in? Will the vendor provide references from customers using similar equipment?

Do they have knowledge about particular disabilities? How does the vendor stay up-to-date on new developments in both technology and rehabilitation? Does the vendor have an ATP or an ATS credential?

What is the vendor’s responsibility if errors occur in measuring, ordering, assembling, or delivering the device? Does the vendor carry professional liability insurance?

Questions to Ask Specific to Vendor Services
Does the vendor have in-house service people and adequate parts inventory to service the device? What is the average “turn-around” time for a repair? Will the vendor provide a written estimate of cost and time for a repair? Will the vendor make comparable equipment available for loan during a repair? Does the vendor provide a warranty on service or customization of equipment?

Consider Device Training Needs
The arrival of a piece of equipment is not the end of the process. Both the end-user and anyone else who provides support in device use should receive training. Training may be provided by the vendor, a manufacturer’s representative, staff from a medical or educational setting, or an ATP or ATS credentialed individual. Training helps ensure that the technology is used effectively, safely, and consistently in all the relevant environments. Proper use and maintenance also minimizes the cost and inconvenience of breakdowns and repairs.

Next Steps
Selecting the right assistive technology can increase an individual’s independence and productivity. A simple first step is to contact your state AT program; you will find the information regarding it on the back cover of this brochure.
The 56 statewide Assistive Technology (AT) Programs form a national network. Information contained in this brochure represents the accumulation of knowledge of this national network. The AT Programs receive funding from the US Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to implement the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, as amended. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred. In Wyoming, this program is known as WIND Assistive Technology Resources (WATR) CFDA #84.224A.

Alternative formats available upon request by contacting WIND Assistive Technology Resources (WATR), watr@uwyo.edu, (307) 766-2720 or 1 (888) 989-WIND (9463).