

Technology Brings Jobs to the Disabled

By Faiza Elmasry
Washington DC
17 March 2006

If you contact the customer service department of a government agency or major U.S. company, or order something over the phone, it's likely that your call will be answered by someone with a disability, working from their home. It could be on a farm in Iowa, or a small town in the Vermont mountains.



Ed McCann

Ed McCann is one of more than 300 disabled order entry clerks in 42 states who are working for the Internal Revenue Service, the IRS. "The calls that come in for forms and publication forms for the IRS come to me," he says. "I take information for processing those forms. People who call me are sometimes not clear on what exactly they need and I'd give them the assistance and guidance determining what

they would need."

McCann answers those calls from his home. The 35-year old former computer instructor has Arthrogyrosis Multiplex congenital, a rare form of arthritis that limits his ability to move. He began working for the IRS from home a year and a half ago.

Steven Singley, 41, has been working from home since last year. He spent the nine years before that working at the call center of a department store. A car accident 20 years ago left him a quadriplegic, in a wheelchair with only limited movement in one of his arms. Getting to his workplace everyday, he says, was the most challenging part of his job.

"To be able to get up out of the bed, I had to have help from people to get me dressed," he says. "I had to get out of the house, and either get a ride in a van to my workplace or on a bus. I only lived about a mile from where I worked. So, I traveled on my wheelchair on good weather days."

He says working from home has made his life easier... and technology has made it possible.

"Once I hooked up on my computer, I can type with my right arm that has enough movement to be able to type, one key at a time with the

typer. It's a tool that has a rubber tip on the end and I can hit one key at a time," he says. "I put my phone next to me, and a trackball - it's similar to a mouse - that sets over my arm rest and I can move the cursor around."



Alpine CEO, Garth Howard

Singley received training to start working from home through Alpine Access, a firm that provides call center services, relying on a home-based workforce. Alpine CEO Garth Howard says technology is bringing jobs to thousands of disabled people.

"We really focus on peoples' ability not their disability," he says.

"Anybody can have a career from home. Technology is actually quite simple. All that they need is a computer, high speed Internet access

and a telephone with headset, and they are ready to work."

M.J. Willard is executive director of the National Telecommuting Institute, which finds on-line jobs Americans with disabilities can do from home. "We have a number of people who have mobility impairments such as spinal cord injuries, Multiple Sclerosis, Muscular dystrophy," she says.

The company's employment services are not limited to people with physical impairments. "They may have chemical sensitivity. They could have lupus," she says. "They could be recovering from cancer and chemotherapy treatments. They could have a stamina issue that they really need to work part-time, three or four hours a day."



M.J. Willard

She says call-takers typically get one to six weeks of virtual training... using the same technology that will help them do their jobs. "For example, there may be 15 students," she says. "They are all connected with their instructor. They can hear her over their headsets. But they're also looking at their computer screens, and they can see her screen, and they can watch her as she does each and every step. And she can turn around and role-play with the group. She can say, 'John, now you're going to be the agent and I'll be the customer,' and everybody in the class can now see John's screen. It's just as if they were in a regular classroom except they are all across the country. As they come toward the end of the training, the students are taking several calls and the whole class is listening in and the trainer is critiquing how they are doing each time. At the end of the whole process they graduate. They go right on the phones and they are taking calls the next day."

While hiring the disabled to work from home with call centers is still a new trend, Willard says many employers have been happy to discover this untapped labor pool.

"One of the problems call centers have is people don't tend to stay for a long time in these jobs," she says. "They move on. We are able to say, look, we bring a population to the table that doesn't have a lot of options, so if you allow them to work from home you're going to get very loyal workers, very motivated workforce. And it isn't unusual that you find people that are a bit better qualified for call center jobs than what they ordinarily find."

Alpine Access CEO Garth Howard agrees. He says instead of moving to a new building or leasing an additional space, employers can easily find skilled at-home workers. And for those workers, getting such a job can be a life changing experience. "Everybody likes to work and be productive," he says. "Many of these disabled people are able to perform a service that's needed and useful and also have social interaction of dealing with a customer. So everybody comes out a winner."

Industry executives expect job opportunities for home-based disabled workers to grow over the next five years. And as new computer technology becomes more available, and more affordable, they say this model could be replicated, giving disabled workers around the world a chance to be productive and independent.