

Michael Muehe

# Providing key support to disability services

When the personal computer revolution happened and speech recognition software like Dragon® appeared, Michael Muehe was an early adopter. He recalls: “I’ve been using Dragon since the old days, when you ... had ... to ... speak ... word ... by ... word. And I thought it was revolutionary at the time.”

Muehe, who sustained a spinal cord injury in his freshman year in college and has been using a wheelchair ever since, has been actively involved in the disability rights movement, which was in its nascent stages during the mid-to-late 1970s. He worked at the Massachusetts Office on Disability and was later the Director of Chapter Services for the National Spinal Cord Injury Association.

Today, Muehe has spent the past 17 years serving as the Executive Director of the Commission for Persons with Disabilities in the city of Cambridge, MA. His job, which requires a lot of writing in Microsoft Outlook and Word, is split into three equal duties: giving technical assistance on the ADA and other disability laws to colleagues working for the city; teaching local businesses and non-profits how to accommodate people with disabilities; and working with the local disability community to improve access and provide information about resources.

Because of his spinal cord injury, Muehe has very limited finger dexterity. “Dragon is a big time saver for email. I dictate 95-98% of my email with it,” Muehe relates. “Most people tend to write abbreviated emails, but I can write a nice, long complete email in under five minutes versus the 15 to 30 minutes it would take me with my fingers. It’s more professional to use complete sentences, eliminate confusing acronyms and abbreviated jargon.

“When typing with my fingers, I used to look for shortcuts, which isn’t a bad idea, but something can get lost when you do that. If I have only five or ten minutes to write a letter, I can do it, whereas in the past, it might not have gotten done well.”

He adds: “When I finish a phone call, I’ll write a progress note in Microsoft Word with Dragon, detailing the nature of the call and any need for follow-up. Dragon has become an integral part of that process too.”

Muehe’s job requires the use of a lot of specific proper names, and he says Dragon’s ability to add words to its vocabulary is also a key part of his workflow.

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“If I say a new phrase,” he says, “I add it right away, with just a few seconds of training. It saves a lot of time in the long run because I use a lot of references to various organizations, laws, and so forth every day.”

His cordless headset also helps streamline his work day. “It has a CT switch that lets me switch between the computer and the telephone. I can just flip the switch when I get a call and flip it back when I’m done. I never have to take the headset off.”

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