



2021 AT Scholar Report

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ATIA 2021

Having heard a lot about the annual ATIA conference in Florida over the years, I was delighted to be asked to attend this year’s socially-distanced gathering as a member of the British Assistive Technology Scholarship delegation.

Even in its virtual form, the conference has lived up to its sterling reputation. I have been hugely impressed by ATIA 2021’s rich programme of high-quality sessions.

I have also appreciated the inclusiveness of the conference, which benefitted from a noticeable presence of people who use assistive technology, among both presenters and audience members.

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Meet Bradley and Dan

One of the sessions that I attended which captured this theme most clearly was the presentation delivered by Bradley Heaven and his aide Dan O’Connor.

Bradley – who was born with cerebral palsy and is unable to verbally communicate – and Dan charted their relationship with technology and each other, explaining the dynamics of an inspiring decade-old friendship that has seen the duo become vocal advocates for assistive technology in the United States through their product reviews on YouTube and All Access Life website.

They reflected on how the march of technological progress has enabled Bradley to study and socialise and described Dan’s crucial role in ensuring Bradley can make the most of his technology.

The onset of the pandemic and social distancing has compelled the pair to devise new ways of working together over Zoom, with Dan learning how to troubleshoot Bradley’s technology remotely – something with which fellow assistive technology users like myself can emphasise.

Breaking down barriers

Another source of vibrancy in the assistive technology sector is research that pushes the boundaries of existing products and services.

Ohio University’s Christina Corso’s presentation of the early findings from her study exploring the impact of smart home technology on the independence of people who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) shows why it is important to continue with such valuable work even in the time of Covid-19.

Christina worked with four individuals and their families to assemble smart home set-ups that they could operate by issuing commands through their AAC devices.



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Each participant received a bundle of smart technologies and services including two Amazon Alexa Dots, smart bulbs, smart sockets, an Audible book and a subscription to Amazon Prime Video. Christina also helped participants programme their AAC software to work with the smart devices.

The study illustrates the opportunities and challenges of integrating assistive technology with mainstream products. Participants were invited to use their communication aids in a new way, enabling them to gain greater control over their environment without having to learn a new system from scratch.

However, the process of setting up technology was technically onerous, involving challenges ensuring apps were accessible, pairing different smart devices and the added complication of faulty hardware. Christina described the tedious trial and error of getting Alexa to understand the synthesized voice output of some communication devices through various spellings and pronunciations of the Amazon voice assistant's name.

AT in transition

The blending of specialist and mainstream technologies was also represented at this year's conference by the strong presence of companies such as Microsoft and Google, both of whom had dedicated virtual zones boasting large amounts of content.

For example, the Microsoft Experience included a presentation by designer Bryce Johnson about the creation of the Xbox Adaptive Controller and the software giant's company-wide approach to making sure its products are inclusively designed.

Google's offerings included videos about the customisable shortcut building Android smart phone app Action Blocks and Project Euphonia, which is using artificial intelligence to develop voice-recognition software that understands people with speech impairments.

Beyond Covid-19

The sense of changing times in the assistive technology sector captured in many of the sessions was echoed by the changing of the guard at the top of the American federal government, which coincided with this year's conference.

Audrey Busch from the Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs and Marty Exline from the Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance and Training (AT3) Center provided an overview of the unique assistive technology policy landscape confronting the newly-installed administration of President Joe Biden and the 117th United States Congress.

As in the UK, technology has been a key part of the mix of government interventions in the United States that has been put in place to help shield disabled and older people from the worst of Covid-19. The speakers outlined a number of measures that Congress passed in December to boost funding for specialist assistive technology programmes managed by states and through an increase in funding for schools and universities.

The coming months and years are likely to witness further congressional action to increase access to assistive technology and telehealth services for disabled people. There might also be a push to enact a new assistive technology bill, which proposes to improve support for older people, veterans and those living in rural communities.

Despite the backdrop of the pandemic, ATIA 2021 has shown that the assistive technology sector remains as energised as ever – bustling with fresh ideas and animated by a commitment to make things better. Even after the past year, it is difficult not to be optimistic about the future.