



2021 AT Scholar Report

TALITA HOLZER

Talita Holzer is CEO and Co-Founder at waytoB, promoting independent travel for people of all abilities.

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ATIA 2021

I was extremely surprised and excited to receive the invitation to be a British AT Scholar and attend the prestigious ATIA conference. I have been working in the area of Assistive Technology since the beginning of my career in 2014 and I know how important it is to continuously learn about new initiatives and technologies to ensure we are providing the best services and products to our users.

As CEO and co-founder of waytoB, an early stage AT startup, I immediately recognised the value and the privilege of attending ATIA and accessing such relevant and exclusive knowledge first-hand. I was very impressed with the quality of the talks and the relevance of the topics to our organisation. WaytoB is my first enterprise and I started it right after University, so I recognise the importance of acquiring new knowledge quickly better than most. I also value the opportunity to network with like-minded peers and other professionals who have walked similar paths, to seek guidance and make proper connections.

As anyone who has worked in a startup before will confirm, it is quite challenging to attend conferences, especially when they last more than 1 day. This usually means that small companies miss important opportunities. With COVID-19, attending large events has become an even greater barrier for obvious reasons. ATIA 2021 has addressed this issue brilliantly by not only moving all its content online, but also providing attendees the option to watch recorded sessions whenever suited them best.

As expected, COVID-19 was the focus of many of the presentations. Similarly to the efforts made by ATIA to digitise their content and make it more inclusive by providing recorded sessions, most AT organisations have moved online to cope with COVID-19 restrictions. It was comforting to see many of the practices presented being so similar to the ones adopted by our company. It was also encouraging to see such positive results and realise that we are not the only ones planning on continuing those practices after restrictions are lifted. Several talks included practical tips on how to offer remote support to patients, many switching to a 100% Telehealth model, which I found very impressive.

At WaytoB, we used to provide in person training to client organisations, and many times in person support throughout the first months of use of the software. As our product is a smartphone and smartwatch app to support people with learning disabilities to navigate independently, utilising the traditional approach to offer training and support seemed essential. We would spend 2-3 days with a local authority or charity, guiding them through the app, the desktop platform and going on walking and public transport journeys with them until they became confident using the system. We would return several other times during the first months to ensure operations were running smoothly and end-users were getting the most value out of the app. At the time, we thought it would be impossible to move these services online, as both our company and our clients valued the real-time, face-to-face interaction. When the first lockdown happened, we were forced to change many of our practices - from working from home to providing training and support online. We noticed that much of the training and support provided was repetitive and could be recorded; many of the issues and doubts people had were also the same in every organisation, so these could be easily provided in a FAQ format. Digitising these practices has saved us time and money, and allowed us to connect in real time with our clients remotely and only when necessary to create and develop a good relationship.

Attending the ATIA conference helped me feel more confident about the new practices that we have introduced since COVID-19 started. It allowed me to see many similar practices being adopted by other



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organisations, and also identify new creative ways of dealing with issues that may arise from digitising services like these. It also allowed me to see more clearly what life will be like for WaytoB, our clients and end-users after COVID-19. Many speakers talked about this, and shared their thoughts on a hybrid approach to service provision - where some services are provided in person to provide better care and ensure clients and users are receiving the most value, while others can easily be provided online, as long as this is done in an accessible and inclusive manner.

It was also meaningful for me to learn more about what organisations have been doing to address the issue of social isolation. At WaytoB, our main focus is to support individuals with learning disabilities to become more socially integrated, so the impact of COVID-19 has worried us deeply. We are aware that there will be a long-term impact on the disabled population in the UK and beyond, and we are keen to come up with innovative ways to do our part in mitigating this. We understand that, although vaccination programmes have been successful, life will be considerably different for the next few years and it is imperative that we keep ideating and creating new solutions to avoid that disabled people get further marginalised. It was inspiring to see how many organisations think the same way and have been putting the needs and wants of their service users first, and developing innovative practices around those. It was also refreshing to see the positive results of these practices and to learn how these results were measured so we can also implement similar models of assessment within our organisation.

As I am incredibly interested in innovation and cutting edge technology, I have also attended a number of ATIA talks that were not directly relevant to waytoB - and I was pleasantly surprised by how much I have learned. From talks about Alexa, to Eye Gaze technology and Artificial Intelligence, I was inspired to dive deeper into some of these subjects and bring many new ideas to our technology development team. Seeing so many successful examples of implementation of these exciting technologies has motivated them to have more brainstorming sessions and explore the use of new approaches to solve problems we have - from simple issues like effectively onboarding new clients, to more complex problems such as inaccurate GNSS data collected on the user's smartwatch, which can severely affect the performance of our navigation product.

There are so many interesting talks to choose from, I suggest taking the time to get organised a few days before the conference. I made sure not to miss any talks I flagged as essential, but also attend some of the other talks I was personally interested in, which I did not regret doing at all! It was incredible to have the option to watch certain talks at a later date and re-watch talks that were more relevant or that I felt I had missed important information. I really enjoyed ATIA 2021 and I am so thankful for being provided with this opportunity that has genuinely made a difference to the future of our small enterprise and the people we support.