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Returning an Employee to Work with Speech Recognition

Introduction

Speakeasy Solutions works with WorkSafe BC, Occupational Therapists, Return to Work Coordinators and many others all with the same agenda: returning an injured employee to productive work.

It's never a simple task and my hat is off to these amazing people who are relied upon to have a world of knowledge at their fingertips. I am always happy to provide any information that may assist them in the very rewarding task of seeing someone return to work after an absence as a result of injury.

One of the more prevalent injuries is that of RSI (repetitive strain injury) -- invisible yes, but quite tragic and life altering. As someone who was diagnosed with more soft tissue damage than I care to think about, I understand the impact of RSI and also am grateful for the technology that enabled me to have a career again: speech recognition.

I write this article today from the perspective of someone who also assists employees return to work as part of an overall plan as guided by an Insurance company, Employer, Return to Work Coordinator and so on. I look forward to continuing to work with you, and hope that some of my experiences may be insightful.

Please, at any time, do not hesitate in contacting me directly to confidentially discuss any of your cases. I take personal delight in assisting in the return to work process and know very well what it means to have a goal and gainful employment to look forward to.

Options and Roadblocks

A consultation and interview are often necessary to determine what options are available to the employee and employer, as well as unearth any potential roadblocks that might inhibit the return to work process. Interviewing the employee and employer (if there is an employer involved) are essential.

What the Employee Wants

Sometimes the employee has a set of skills or interests that were previously unexplored or stemmed from a previous occupation. If these can be harnessed, then an alternate solution can be explored if returning to previous duties is not possible.

I find that it's best to assume that a worker is permanently incapacitated in some way. RSI is often a life-long limitation, and some employees that I've worked with have had other accidents leaving them permanently physically challenged.

Harness the power of speech



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When I teach someone how to incorporate assistive computer technology into their lives, I try to move towards eliminating as much mousing and keyboarding as possible. Sometimes I've had to make concessions, but this is with clients (employees) who've professed that they could engage limited mousing or keyboarding activities.

The best scenarios are those where an employer is very involved in returning their employee to either the same job or a slightly modified situation. Even in the case of RSI, an employee can often perform the same tasks they did previously, albeit with an effectively implemented speech recognition solution.

And that is the key: successful return to work is dependent upon many factors, including an effectively implemented speech recognition solution.

Retraining

Sadly my experience with retraining has not always been met with resounding success. This highly depends upon the employee and their ability to learn, as well as their interest, in computer related technologies.

An employee who has spent most of their life in labour occupations and has never used a computer is not always the best candidate for learning computer based skills. Speech recognition is one of the most sophisticated and complex computer technologies. Learning to use Dragon NaturallySpeaking effectively is not nearly as simple as it is learning to research on the Internet, perform mail merges in Word or manage email in Outlook. However, it can seem that simple and become so for the person who is motivated. I've learned that as well – never underestimate anyone who is motivated.

And motivation is the key to success with speech recognition, regardless of background.

Computer Prerequisites

Returning to retraining for a moment, however... It's a chicken and egg scenario. The employee needs speech recognition in order to use a computer, but they require a certain amount of computer skills to learn Dragon. Someone who is determined, however, can learn anything.

My suggestion in times past was to tutor the employee in basic computer functions, including internet, word processor, and email (i.e. introduction to MS Office applications). The tutor, however, must be willing to be the employee's hands on the computer. This is difficult as most people learn better when they are physically involved in the learning process.

Patience is definitely in order for all involved.

What Dragon Can and Can't Do

Dragon can allow someone to use nearly every aspect of their computer by voice (often times much faster than without Dragon). Most people think of Dragon as simple voice to text technology for writing letters and email but it's far more powerful and can have a computer or its applications jump through one or a series of hoops all by voice. An effectively set up employee can work miracles on a computer with speech recognition.

Dragon's major failing is its inability to sanely (it can perform the following, but not adequately enough for a demanding work environment) navigate a mouse around the screen in a non repetitious pattern. As an example, in Adobe Photoshop or any other graphic manipulation program, you will be using your mouse to click and drag over parts of an image. Dragon cannot emulate this very well. However, if an employee has some limited mousing ability, they can use Dragon to perform numerous actions in Photoshop and reserve their hand use for mouse



related photo manipulation. The adaptation of Dragon to an employee's job description can be determined through an assessment.

Unfortunately, some people have come to me in the past, proclaiming that Dragon will not function in a certain piece of software because someone else said that it's impossible. I always view such comments sceptically as I have seen Dragon function in DOS programs, across a telnet system, and so much more. Granted, in some cases, a series of custom commands had to be written in Dragon, but the results were outstanding.

I strongly encourage anyone who has concerns over Dragon functioning in a specific software application or system to contact Speakeasy Solutions for an assessment to determine the extent of compatibility. We test for two main factors: voice to text and command control.

It is entirely possible that Dragon will not function well in the application in question, but more often than not, Dragon has worked in scenarios otherwise deemed incompatible. However, these are situations worth exploring if an employee can be returned to their previous duties.

Cost of Future Care

In some cases, an employee is injured quite extremely and quality of life becomes the focus. If such an individual is able to use a computer to surf the internet, interact with others, and engage in other mentally stimulating activities, speech recognition becomes essential in adapting to their new life.

As much as I enjoy working with people in return to work situations, I receive tremendous personal joy in helping others access a whole new life via adaptive computer technology. The level of independence that can be achieved will depend on other computer assistive technologies in addition to speech recognition, as well as access to care givers. We're utilizing computers after all, and we all know that they can crash and be problematic!

The provision of speech recognition technology is not a one-time investment. The same can be said for the computer and all that encompasses it. Please find following some relevant points that may assist in costing out immediate and future care:

- **A computer's lifespan is approximately 3 years.** After three years, software and hardware aspects will break down and often have a cascade effect, ultimately rendering the computer useless. Unless someone is a computer savant, they will not know how to replace specific PC components to lengthen the lifespan of their computer.
- **Associated costs include internet service providers, a tech to set up an email account, and potentially the provision of an email account.** Most service providers offer an email account as part of their monthly service provision.
- **Downloads and surfing are dangerous.** Most people do not understand that surfing to certain websites (even accidentally), and downloading files can invite malicious software and endless problems to their computer. An effective antivirus is key (NOD32 by ESET is one of the best, by the way), but common sense and understanding on behalf of the user is equally important.
- **Software upgrades generally every 1 to 3 years.** While not every upgrade is essential, there are sometimes rules that only allow obtaining the new version of a software application at a reduced price over the span of 2 versions. In other words, waiting too long to upgrade can result in having to buy the software at full price again in the future.
- **Everyone needs computer repair and maintenance.** No matter how diligently someone cares for their computer, events occur that require maintenance. Computers are not perfect, and a hard drive can fail 6 months after purchase. A program or data can become corrupt and require reinstallation or repair. A virus



or other malware can destroy a system entirely. A new version of an application may also require installation. Cables can become damaged by pets or cleaning staff. The list is endless.

- **A backup system will preserve important data.** Depending on the use of the computer, most people can benefit with a backup system even if it's as simple as copying their data onto a USB memory stick. There are numerous backup solutions available, but they must also be adhered to by the user.

In Conclusion

With over 11 years providing speech recognition solutions, plus over 14 years of personal experience in using Dragon, I look forward to continuing to assist others with speech recognition technology. Please contact myself, Alexandria Carstens, any time, to discuss the needs of your client or employee. The implementation of an effective speech recognition solution can change an injured worker's life and give them the confidence they need to return to work.

I look forward to speaking with you soon!



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