Assistive Technology in the Public Library

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According to the United States Census Bureau, 56.7 million people, 19% of the population, had a disability in 2010. In the City of Denton, 8.5% of the population is classified as having a disability (United States Census Bureau, 2016). Based on these figures, it is important that the Denton Public Library expand their assistive technology devices for access to technology, not only in the library, but from a home computer as well. With part of the Denton Public Library’s mission statement being “to promote lifelong learning,” the Denton Public Library needs to seek ways to make the library accessible to all people, including those with disabilities (City of Denton, 2016). The Denton Public Library is currently using a few forms of assistive technology for its patrons; TTY Relay telephones, video enlarging devices, large button keyboards, and special programming, but there is room for improvement in serving the patrons of the Denton Public Library. This paper will be a broad look at improvements that the Denton Public Library can make, as well as an explanation of the importance of assistive technologies in public libraries.

Assistive technology is defined as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system…that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” (Gauder, 2012). This term can be applied to a broad range of resources that the library can use to make their environment more accessible to persons with disabilities. Of course, when looking at obtaining new resources for library use, one has to look at budget and the specific audience and their needs. For the function of this paper, I will be simplifying this into 2 questions.

1. Will it provide all library users with equal access to library resources?

2. Will it be a valuable resource for the Denton community?
Assistive technology plays a very important role in the public library setting. Assistive technology can help to create a welcoming and empowering learning environment to persons with disabilities. Providing all people access to library materials and resources, both in the library and from home, provides opportunities to gain knowledge, create new connections, and gain independence. This is of particular importance to people with disabilities.

There are various forms of assistive technology that fall primarily into these five categories: screen reading technology, magnifying technology, literacy technology, speech recognition technology, and peripheral technology. Screen reading and magnifying technology help those who are visually impaired or are blind - screen reading technology is for computers and other technological devices, and magnifying technology is for print materials. Literacy technology is primarily for persons with learning disabilities to aid in reading and writing. Literacy technology also includes braille technology for persons with vision impairments or are blind. Speech recognition technology allows someone who has limited mobility in their hands to navigate web pages or create documents using their speech. Peripheral technology includes any device that allows a user to operate a computer. Peripheral technology includes large button keyboards, pointers, facial recognition software, different mouse types, headphones, microphones, etc (Guder, 2012).

Many of the assistive technology purchases that the Denton Public Library would consider would be based on understanding the users’ specific needs. Improving the assistive technologies for the users that already visit the Denton Public Library is a good first step. As stated before, the Denton Public Library has a video enlarging screen that allows patrons to enlarge print material to be viewed. This is a good resource for many of the low vision patrons.
that visit the library. One of the first areas that the Denton Public Library could look into is providing screen magnifying software on the computers that allows for these same patrons with low vision to access. Other easy, and cheap, assistive technology purchases that the Denton Public Library could make would be peripheral devices for the computers. These are devices that could be used by a wide range of people, and not just people with disabilities. Large keyboards, for example, can be used by senior citizens or children as well as persons with a disability. Another purchase that would be beneficial for a large range of Denton Public Library customers would be an accessibility interface for all public computers. One of these interfaces, Microsoft Accessibility, would work on all Windows computers at the Denton Public Library. This interface includes a magnifying feature, a narrating feature, speech recognition, and an on screen keyboard. These features would be beneficial to a large range of Denton Public Library customers (Aliza, 2012).

Many of the assistive technology acquisitions that the Denton Public Library could make could be simple and relatively free for the library system. These would include easy to read signage about the assistive technology options at the library, large print labels for computers, shelves, etc., email correspondence with customers, and adjustable furniture (Aliza, 2012).

Future assistive technology purchases for the Denton Public Library would be more difficult to gauge. Many assistive technologies are more specialized in their purpose. This is where knowing the library customers and their specific needs would be helpful. Some of these purchases include braille readers or printers, literacy software on computers that would help patrons to read and write, speech input software, screen reader software, or braille output for
computers. All of these technologies, although highly beneficial to certain patrons, would need to be well considered before purchasing (Guder, 2012).

Obtaining future funding for these specialized assistive technologies would be the largest challenge for the Denton public library. To do this the Denton Public Library would need to create a citizen survey to find what the public would want in terms of assistive technology. The results of the survey would then have to be presented to the library board and city council along with a budget and projected use. Denton Public Library’s mission statement, community needs, and pressure to create a more accessible library to all of the Denton community would be able to quickly drive any budget request.

These functions are essential to the Denton Public Library to continue serving a swiftly growing and ever more diverse public. As Denton grows and further diversifies, the library's mission will grow with it. For this growth to be positive, the library must work to reach the farthest corners of that diversity. “Increasing accessibility to public computing does not necessarily involve complicated and fancy assistive technology…. With careful research and planning, these more specialized solutions can significantly help libraries serve all members of their communities” (Aliza, 2012).
References


