Broadband Can Assist People with Disabilities or Illness

Broadband Assists a Mental Health Support Group

Tom Mclean believes that "broadband is a great resource for support groups because it allows greater interactivity, makes organisations more efficient, and allows them to reach broader audiences." Tom speaks from experience as the co-ordinator of Openshawe-based Having a Voice, a user-led organisation that provides counselling, self help groups and information on mental illness for its members.

Having a Voice's web site has over 1000 pages of information and advice. It also supports a chat room, forum and other features which enable users to get a quick and often instant response to queries. The service is now being extended through an Online Emotional Support (OLES) which will allow users in emotional distress to instantly access counsellors by text, voice, or webcam. As Tom McLean notes, "this will allow us to offer support at the times when our clients are most vulnerable, which is often late at night or early in the morning."

He also believes that broadband "is helping us as an organisation because we can do everything so much more quickly. And it allows us to tap into a broader pool of resources. For example, we were looking for someone to do some software development work but struggled to find the right person locally. In the end we employed a person living in Leeds, which was only possible because they could use broadband to work from home for part of the time."

The OLES development team

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Key Facts

■ **Broadband can be especially helpful to people with disabilities, for example, by providing easy access to human contact and information for disabled people with limited mobility**

■ **Having a Voice uses broadband and the Internet to support people with mental illness**

■ **deafgateway provides a portal site with information and other resources for people with hearing impairment.**

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"Being connected can transform the lives of many people with hearing difficulties, as well as other kinds of disability"

Broadband Assists the Deaf Community

The Deaf Community Information Gateway ('deafgateway') is making the most of broadband technology by providing a vital on-line resource for deaf people in Greater Manchester. It was developed by members of its target audience to provide content about support and useful information, both local and national, and to enable (often isolated) individuals to communicate with each other. A fast and reliable connection to the Internet offered by broadband enables users to access news and information - through media-rich content, such as signed video material - that many of us take for granted.

Gary Copitch is Director of the Manchester Community Information Network (MCIN), an umbrella organisation which provides organisational and technical support for such projects. He remembers that deafgateway began when a group of activists examined what was available on-line and found "a number of gaps, such as health information. Much of the available material was also text heavy and very little was in British Sign Language (BSL). We also found very low levels of awareness and use of ICT amongst those with hearing difficulties - which is a national pattern."

Gary points to Jonathan ('Jono') Rappaport, deafgateway's first (part-time) manager as an example of how such projects can make a difference. "I know from our conversations," he says, "that Jono was out of work when the project began, but through it he acquired the skills and confidence not only to leave and become a freelance web designer, but also to take an extended trip to Australia - something I don't think he would have contemplated before."

"Broadband was useful from the start," he continues, "it shows how being connected can transform the lives of many people with hearing difficulties, as well as other kinds of disability."

Broadband Can Be of Great Benefit to Disabled People

Broadband can be especially helpful to people with disabilities because it:

■ Is always on so that fewer mouse clicks and other actions are needed to connect and reconnect

■ Allows use of rich content such as signed videos for people who are deaf, or voiceovers for people with impaired sight

■ Can provide easy access to human contact and information for disabled people with limited mobility

■ Can make home working easier.

Of course, conventional hardware and software makes it difficult for many people with disabilities to achieve these benefits. However, adapted equipment and special software provides a readily available solution.

Further Information

The Northwest Regional Development Agency wants the region's people and businesses to benefit from the new opportunities created by the digital revolution. It has worked with partners to establish Digital Development Agencies in Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Greater Merseyside and Lancashire to achieve this at local level. The agencies help identify ICT priorities for their areas, work with local organisations to identify projects to address them, and secure the resources to make these projects happen.