

A man in a grey suit and blue tie stands in front of an American flag. The flag is on the left side of the frame, and the man is on the right. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

MHS Profiles

MILITARY HEALTH SYSTEM

EQUIPPED FOR *success*



By Krista D. Holyak



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Empowering through employment: *Stephen King, disability program manager at the DoD Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity, breaks down barriers in the hiring, retention, promotion and employment of persons with disabilities. King strives to raise awareness on how persons with disabilities can excel in the workforce, often with the use of assistive technologies.*



// From both physical and mental standpoints, wounded warriors overcome a multitude of obstacles from the injuries they sustained. //

One man breaks down employment barriers to help those with disabilities excel in their careers. Another guides wounded service members through rehabilitation, re-teaching one how to brush his teeth. One woman leads an initiative to provide free tools to those with disabilities, while a war veteran returns home and finds the need for these tools to help transition to civilian life. Together, these individuals harness the power of assistive technology.

Retired Army Capt. Matthew Staton quickly learned how this kind of technology could help him overcome obstacles. Staton, direct advisor and staff assistant to the secretary of the Army on wounded soldier matters, medically retired from the Army in August 2007 because of a cognitive disability, following two deployments to Iraq. Service as a platoon leader exposed him to multiple improvised explosive device blasts in Balad, Iraq. He was also injured in 2004 with a gunshot wound to his left hip and upper thigh. Two years after he was medically evacuated to Fort Carson in February 2004, he was involved in a traffic accident after a car sped through a stop sign,

hitting his vehicle as he traveled to a town hall meeting to update family members and spouses on the status of the battlefield.

“I saw stars on several of these occasions ... but never lost consciousness,” he says. Staton wouldn’t know the long-term effect his injuries would have until he returned home and began his transition to civilian life.

At home, Staton realized his need for assistive technology. The medications Staton takes to alleviate migraines, leg pain and complications from his injuries slow his cognitive functioning. “I realized there was a problem when I couldn’t remember any of the five items my wife asked me to pick up at the grocery store. I’d end up bringing ten things home, only one of which she asked me to get.”

These types of disabilities often directly influence performance at work. “If it’s not written down or recorded, the conversation didn’t happen in my mind,” says Staton, reflecting on how memory problems affect work productivity. The Department of Defense Computer/Electronic Accommodations Pro-



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gram, or CAP, provided Staton accommodations in the workplace in the form of a Personal Data Assistant and an ergonomic chair. The PDA's primary role, in addition to serving as a voice recorder, is to set reminders and help Staton overcome what most people would see as forgetfulness.

CAP raises the quality of health care through unique uses of technology, assessing wounded warriors, matching their needs to appropriate tools and providing the technologies at no cost.

"I am able to receive upgrades from CAP as I continue to serve as a DoD Army civilian," explains Staton. "Needs assessments can be completed online, with the opportunity for my provider to give input, bridging the gap in medical needs and assistive technology."

The assistive technologies provided by CAP, along with work modifications such as telework options, allow persons with disabilities to be effective and maintain employment. "Assistive technology reduces my stress level and augments me when I must take medications to deal with physical pain and side effects to where I still am a beneficial employee.

Even though my active duty service was cut short, I can still serve and help wounded soldiers as they come home," says Staton.

Staton has been able to recover to the point where he is less dependent on technologies. "I no longer feel like I am a burden on my wife." At the age of 33, he is able to successfully provide for his family.

Providing Real Solutions for Real Needs

Since its inception in 1990 by the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, CAP has filled more than 81,500 requests for accommodations, enabling wounded service members and federal employees with disabilities to perform essential job functions. Dinah Cohen, CAP director, says, "Different disabling conditions can benefit from the use of assistive technology, leading to accomplishments in the day-in, day-out operations of today's electronic and information environment."

For more than 20 years, CAP has actively pursued its mission of "providing real solutions for real needs" by increasing access to information, working to remove barriers to employment opportunities and eliminating the cost of



assistive technology and accommodation solutions. The program expanded from serving military departments and defense agencies to also establishing partnerships with 66 other federal agencies, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. “The Computer/Electronic Accommo-

dations Program is helping to make the federal government the model employer for people with disabilities,” says Cohen.

Ensuring Success After Service

The effects of war often linger long after a service member’s return home. Mental

Completing the task: *After two deployments, certain everyday tasks became difficult to complete for retired Army Capt. Matthew Staton. Today, he benefits from the use of an ergonomic chair and Personal Data Assistant.*



// The Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program is helping to make the federal government the model employer for people with disabilities. //

Assistive Technology How it Helps Those with TBI

Traumatic brain injuries are often invisible from the outside. TBI is caused by a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the normal function of the brain, and its effects can range from mild to severe. There are various types of assistive technology available to assist those with TBI.

The Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program provides a variety of these technologies free of charge to service members, including those who struggle with memory loss and other cognitive impairments as a result of TBI and mild head injuries.

Blast injuries over a period of time can reduce cognitive functions, resulting in short- and long-term memory problems. Personal Data Assistants and software applications can help persons overcome memory difficulties. The widely used PDAs and other cognitive aids remind people of important tasks, such as when to take medication or go to an appointment.

Different types of cueing devices are also readily available, providing disabled persons with a step-by-step process to achieve a particular outcome. For example, if a service member with TBI is having a hard time completing a task, such as making a cup of coffee, the program will walk through the appropriate steps required to finish the task.

Service members who experience vision issues are provided screen magnification software and/or hardware to reduce eye strain, blurry vision and eye fatigue. CAP provides scanners and screen readers and performs certified training for those with complete vision loss.

The program also supports service members who experience hearing loss, including fluctuating, progressive or low-frequency hearing loss and tinnitus. Assistive listening devices can be adjusted to fit the level of amplification needed.

and physical disabilities can change lives from what they once were. Sometimes, simple tasks become complex, senses are weakened and the spirit is drained. Programs like CAP bring hope to the severely wounded to rejoin the workforce and regain self-esteem as they rebuild their lives and careers.

CAP's services provide a range of support to the military family, all with compassion and the goal of maintaining the dignity of the service member and his or her family. "Assistive technology opens so many doors for people with disabilities," explains Stephen King, disability program manager at the DoD Office of Diversity Management and Equal Opportunity. "It could mean the difference between having a job and not having a job."

Through his work, King channels his passion for supporting people with disabilities by helping them rejoin the workforce. He works to address barriers in hiring, retention, promotion and employment of persons with disabilities. "There is life after a disability. There are people who are committed to making sure they have the tools needed to get

a job, keep a job, be successful and be independent,” he says.

Christopher Ebner, an occupational therapist at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, also helps service members with disabilities realize they aren't as limited as they may think. He primarily treats individuals who have sustained upper or lower extremity amputations, burns, vision impairment or different types of orthopedic injuries.

Ebner incorporates technology into the suite of rehabilitation treatments offered to service members, helping them overcome challenges in their jobs and enabling them to be productive and competitive in the workplace. These technologies range in complexity from advanced, such as voice recognition software and PDAs, to something as simple as an index card with a line cut out that a person moves across a page while reading to prevent words from joining together. According to Ebner, the addition of technology can also reduce the length of needed treatment.

Ebner was inspired by the rehabilitative power of assistive technologies while interning at Walter Reed Medical Center in 2003. He attended a presentation held by CAP, which planted a seed in his mind. “I took the knowledge from this presentation with me in terms of programs that are out there to facilitate functional performance on a day-to-day basis with individuals who sustained different types of injuries,” he says.

Years later, Ebner used that knowledge to establish a partnership between CAP and the military medical center at BAMC. Assistive technologies provided by CAP and integrated into wounded warriors' rehabilitation treatment allow them to excel in their careers.

King explains that the availability of different types of assistive

Therapy through

technology: *Occupational therapist Christopher Ebner was inspired to incorporate assistive technology into the rehabilitation process for wounded warriors.*



Giving back to those who gave so much: *Providing the best possible military health care to wounded warriors is a humbling responsibility. The Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program, directed by Dinah Cohen, provides assistive technologies, free of cost, to help those with disabilities excel in the workplace.*

technology equipment in the military sector is greatly beneficial to patients treated at military treatment facilities in the United States and around the world. “We have a lot of initiatives and programs in place at DoD to try to target people with disabilities and our wounded warriors. We try to provide people the accommodations they need, through programs such as CAP, to keep them employed here or to attract them,” King says.

DoD provides health care to a very active patient population—

one that was active prior to injury and is eager to be as active as possible after rehabilitation is complete. In fact, according to Ebner, some individuals become more active following their injury than they were before.

“From both physical and mental standpoints, wounded warriors overcome a multitude of obstacles that were presented to them as a direct result of the injuries they sustained,” Ebner says. He credits this, in part, to assistive technologies available to them. “People can



overcome obstacles by adapting and overcoming, but when you put tools in place that make that accessibility easier and more efficient, the process is a lot different, and I've witnessed that from multiple perspectives over the past few years," he adds.

Embracing Assistive Technology

Individuals like Ebner and King challenge those in the workplace, especially managers, to embrace technology as it advances and not see it as an obstacle. King says, "If individuals who are unfamiliar in managing or working with persons with disabilities will step outside their comfort zone and give it a chance, they will see that we're really only different on the outside." He adds, "Yes, a person may need assistive technology to do a job, but other than that we are the same."

Through the initiatives of Cohen, Ebner and King, wounded service members such as Staton are empowered through employment and are actively supported during recovery and rehabilitation.

King says, "Let us never forget that at any point in our lives, we may acquire a disability -- a slip, a fall, an automobile accident, an IED blast -- and we may find a need to take advantage of policies, procedures and programs designed to support individuals with disabilities. Hopefully, we all find comfort in knowing there are people here to help." ■

Solutions

A Breakdown of CAP Technology Accommodations

The Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program provides solutions that are divided into five categories:

Blind or low vision

- Scanners
- Closed Circuit television
- Reading, writing and comprehension tools
- Magnification software
- Braille displays and embossers
- Portable note takers

Cognitive

- Scanners
- Voice recognition software and related products
- Cueing/memory aids
- Reading, writing and comprehensive tools
- Augmentative communication devices

Communication

- Word prediction software
- Voice amplifiers

Deaf or hard of hearing

- Signaling devices
- Teletypewriters
- PC and Network TTYS
- TTY/voice carry-over telephones
- Assistive listening devices

Dexterity

- Alternative keyboards
- Keyboard trays
- Voice recognition software
- The CAP Ergo Guide
- Lumbar support
- Document holders
- Telephone headset and handsets

To browse all available assistive technology, complete a needs assessment or request accommodations online, visit the CAP Web site at www.tricare.mil/cap.



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SMALLEST HEROES

