Teams and Education Tech Points

The effective and efficient provision of appropriate assistive technology services requires each service provider to not only develop his/her individual knowledge base, but also to work more cooperatively as members of one or more teams. Teams are essential in the provision of good assistive technology services because the selection, operation, and implementation of assistive technology devices require input from more than one discipline. The emergence of assistive technology as an integral part of the educational program of students with disabilities has placed new demands on all service providers who work with them. No one individual knows everything that is needed to help individual students or to provide services across all environments. In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), requires that teams make all key decisions. A team is required to make eligibility and placement decisions. A team that includes the parents, and, when possible, the student, is required to plan the Individual Educational Program. This requirement for teams to work and plan together is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of IDEA and also one of its greatest challenges.

A variety of teams may be asked to contribute to decisions related to assistive technology selection, adaptation, or use. These include the pre referral team, the assessment/evaluation team, the IEP team, the service delivery team, and any specialized Assistive Technology Team that the school district may have identified. One child may even have all of these teams. All of these teams need to be able to work together to accomplish specific tasks and goals. Yet in a study of assistive technology teams across the United States, team building issues were identified by AT team members as one of the greatest challenges to providing successful services (DeCoste, Reed, & Kaplan, 2005).

Effective decision making is dependent upon having a group of individuals with diverse training and knowledge who come together to contribute ideas, information, and direction based upon their unique perspective. It is also dependent upon these individuals being able to effectively share their knowledge and opinions and reach appropriate decisions that can be successfully implemented.

This chapter will first address the contributions of individual team members and the reason they are so essential in providing effective assistive technology services. It will then, focus on the importance of teaching and using good team process.

Why a Team?

Assistive technology is a broad field that encompasses a wide variety of devices from simple no and low tech items for activities of daily living such as dressing and eating to extremely complex computer based devices for power mobility or augmentative communication. It therefore crosses several disciplines, including physical therapy, occupational therapy, rehabilitation engineering, special education, and speech/language pathology. Each team member brings a specific set of skills that can be applied to any question. Team members can apply their skills to questions of assistive technology as well as a variety of other issues.

The only team membership that is specified in IDEA is the members that must be on an IEP or IFSP team. The membership of other teams such as a Child Study team, an assistive technology evaluation team, or a Response to Intervention Team is not specified in the law. Membership in teams like these may vary depending upon the specific purpose and the needs of the individual student. Following is a general picture of how various team members can contribute to an individual student's assistive technology services. This list is not comprehensive and is intended to stimulate thought about the importance of their roles on school district teams making decisions about assistive technology.

- Occupational Therapist (OT): The occupational therapist traditionally is knowledgeable about fine motor development, visual and spatial perception, and independence in daily living activities. In assistive technology they are key in recommending the location or position of devices and determining the most likely means of accessing devices. OTs often have skills in designing or recommending adapted computer access, planning and sometimes guiding keyboarding instruction, and adapting or constructing equipment.

- Parent and, when appropriate, the child: Parents are the overall experts about their children. They have seen them learn and grow. They understand how their children respond in numerous situations and know their interests. A parent spends more time with the child than anyone else and is there in many environments outside of the school. The child, who is able to understand and contribute, can also be an invaluable problem solver as the team works to determine what assistive technology, if any, might be of help.

- Speech/Language Pathologist (SLP): The Speech/Language Pathologist's traditional role centers around language development, content, form and pragmatics, as well as articulation, voice quality and fluency. In assistive technology they are the key source of information and expertise about augmentative/alternative communication devices and their selection and operation. They are critical in the selection of vocabulary and designing content and layout of communication boards and overlays. The SLP suggests ways to maximize a student's speech, language, and communication opportunities throughout the day.

- Special Education Teacher: The Special Education Teacher traditionally has expertise in the academic demands of the educational program, cognitive development, play/social development, behavior management, pre-vocational and vocational skill development, and academic instruction. In assistive technology the Special Educator is essential in identifying opportunities for use of assistive technology in the daily schedule, implementing, supervising, and training the student to use the device, and integrating the use of the device into the curriculum. For some students, specific expertise will also be needed from Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments and Teachers of Students with Hearing Impairments to insure that appropriate consideration is given to specific adaptations and modifications that a student might need if they experience sensory loss.

- General Education Teacher: The General Education teacher has an understanding of the curriculum and the scope and sequence of skills taught in the general education classroom. They help determine where and when assistive technology might be used as an accommodation during instruction, independent seatwork, assessment, and other activities in the classroom. When students need Accessible Instructional Materials (AIM), general education teachers are the primary implementers.

- School Psychologist/Educational Diagnostician: The School Psychologist/ Educational Diagnostician is skilled at providing necessary evaluations and assessments to determine a child's cognitive functioning while taking into account physical disabilities and behavioral characteristics. In assistive technology the School Psychologist/Educational Diagnostician provides suggestions about a student's learning style, cognitive ability, and behavioral expectations in relation to device selection and use.

- Physical Therapist (PT): Traditionally the physical therapist is knowledgeable about gross motor development, posture, seating/positioning, functional mobility, gait training, wheelchair skills, and muscle strengthening. In assistive technology service delivery, the physical therapist recommends devices and implements training related to mobility needs. In addition, the physical therapist is a key person in adapting and constructing mobility, seating, and positioning aids.

- School District Representative: The School District Representative is the person authorized to commit resources to the purchase of equipment, the training of staff, or other administrative decisions that may be needed in order to implement the use of assistive technology.

- Assistive Technology Specialist: The Assistive Technology Specialist is a service provider who has spent extra time and effort to learn the utilization and operation of a variety of assistive technology devices. It is typically a teacher or therapist who has developed this interest through their work with children with disabilities. The Assistive Technology Specialist, if one is available in the district, can be instrumental in determining specific technologies that may

be appropriate because of their knowledge of unique features, limitations, and compatibility of various hardware and software.

For members of any team to work effectively together, it is important to recognize the unique contribution each team member can make. Because educators and therapists are often untrained and inexperienced in working closely together, all team members may need to spend extra time informing the rest of the team about the particular kinds of information they can contribute. All team members can facilitate this by asking appropriate questions and allocating sufficient time to learn about each other's strengths and skills.

TERRY'S TEAM

The first team that met to consider the academic difficulties that Terry was having in school was the child study team. The members of that team were the resource room teacher, Terry's home room teacher, the Chapter 1 teacher and the occupational therapist. In Terry's district, occupational therapists attend any child study team meeting where there is a question of fine motor problems. This is done to help teams make appropriate referrals for occupational therapy assessment.

What is a Team?

What are the characteristics of a "team" that makes it different from other groups that come together to work on common concerns or problems, such as a task force or work group? A team is more than the sum of its parts. Table 1 compares and contrasts a working group with a team.

For a real team to exist, there must be a compelling team purpose that is distinctive and specific to the small group and that requires its members to roll up their sleeves and accomplish something beyond individual end products (Katzenback and Smith , 1993). A team is not simply appointed. To develop into a team, individuals must work together to build an effective working relationship that utilizes each person's knowledge, skills, and interests and complements those strengths with the strengths of other team members. At least part of the team's time together must be devoted to developing and maintaining their "team" in addition to completing the tasks that the team was created to accomplish. See Table 1 for specific differences between a group and a team.

Working Group	Team
A strong, clearly focused leader is appointed.	Leadership is shared among members.
The general organizational mission is the group's purpose, with short-term projects and assignments.	There are specific, well-defined goals that are unique to the team and members value the goals.
Effectiveness is measured indirectly by the group's influence on others.	Effectiveness is measured directly by assessing team products and accomplishments.
Individual accomplishments are recognized and rewarded.	Team efforts are celebrated. Individual's contributions to the team's success are also recognized and celebrated.
Different individuals may join the group for specific tasks or projects.	Team membership is on-going, a change in members requires work to re-establish team norms, roles, identity, etc.
Group members bring their own information, may or may not contribute, and don't worry about the group as a whole.	Team members work at maintenance tasks to ensure that the team can work effectively.
Meetings are efficiently run and last for short periods of time.	Meetings have open-ended discussion and include active problem solving.
In meetings, members discuss, decide, and delegate.	In meetings members discuss, decide, and do real work together.
Decisions may or may not be made y consensus. Leader may seek input, but decide by authority rule.	Decisions are made by consensus.

TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF CHARACTERISTICS OF TEAMS AND GROUPS (adapted from Johnson & Johnson, 2006)

There is a threshold below which a group of people working together to accomplish something of importance to themselves remains just that--an extremely dedicated group of people. What makes them a team? When a group develops into a team, they share common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. It is the shared purpose and goals combined with the mutual accountability that allows a group to become a team. (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

Virtual Teamwork

The use of document sharing sites, web-based meeting tools, email, and social media sites is changing the nature of the way some teams work. It is now possible to create a team that includes people from multiple remote locations who can share ideas, jointly create documents and explore options for students with disabilities without coming together in person to be in the same room.

We call this kind of planning activity *virtual teamwork* to distinguish it from other kinds of team activities.

Many of the features of virtual teamwork are the same as those listed in Table 1. Team membership is on-going, effectiveness is measured, and there are specific team goals that are valued by the members. In meetings, members discuss, decide and do real work together. Despite their commonalities with face-to-face teams, successful virtual teams present some unique challenges. Technology applications, communication strategies and team leadership must all be addressed a little differently when a team works in a virtual environment.

Technology: When a team agrees to work in a virtual meeting environment, the first step is to select the virtual meeting tools that will be used. The choice of technology has a significant impact on the way a team will meet and function in a virtual environment. There are synchronous meeting tools such as *Adobe Connect, Elluminate, GoTo Meeting and Webex* that allow users to hear each other and see the work being created on a computer screen. Virtual meeting tools are particularly useful for meetings where a document like an IEP or AT Implementation plan is being developed. Video chat options such as *Skype, Google Chat,* and *FaceTime,* allow team members to see each other during discussion but do not allow everyone to see a document or video of a child. Video chat tools are particularly good for smaller meetings that are used for progress reports or team check-in. Asynchronous group productivity tools such as *Google Docs and Typewith.me* can be used to create drafts and edit documents between meetings when members are not all able to meet at the same time.

When groups consider choices of technologies than can offer help to build an online team, it is generally true that the simplest tool that will support planned team activities is the better one. Tools that are difficult to understand or use because they have more options than the team needs, have the potential to interfere with team work and make virtual team activities more difficult.

Regardless of the tools that are chosen for the team's activities, the context of the work is more important than the tool. Virtual teams should spend some initial time reviewing and selecting meeting technology applications that will facilitate the work that they are doing. Once the tools are chosen, virtual teams need to have access to tech-support so that they do not loose valuable team work time with technical difficulties. In many successful virtual teams, a new team role may emerge. One or more individuals who are experienced with the technology may be assigned as the tech-support person on the team to teach others how to manage the technology in a non-meeting time.

Communication: Communication among successful virtual team members is often slightly different than communication in face to face teams. Virtual teams work best when they communicate with the group more frequently and in smaller increments (Library Technology Reports, 2008).

When a virtual team does have a synchronous meeting, it is important to ensure that team members have more than superficial interactions online. Successful virtual teams have routines and strategies for their conversations so that members can be prepared. They keep their goals in mind, include all team members in the conversation and encourage one another in the work of the team.

Leadership: Team leadership becomes even more important when team members are unlikely to see or interact with each other in person. It's important for a virtual team to have an assigned leader who is responsible to help the team set performance expectations and model virtual team behaviors. A virtual team leader can enhance the work of the team with frequent check-ins that help members keep track of work progress and goals. Effective virtual team leaders communicate with team members on a frequent and predictable schedule between team activities (Hambley, O'Neill and Kline, 2007).

How do Groups Become Teams?

There are a variety of approaches to team building and numerous publications on the topic. A review of some of these indicates that there needs to be a specific focus on building a team and time spent on developing a shared vision, establishing performance goals, and discussing actions to be undertaken. One conceptualization of team building that seems to fit well with assistive technology is that of Adair (1986). He believes that each group or team is unique, but that they all share three common needs: 1) to achieve the task or tasks which they are supposed to accomplish, 2) to build the team, and 3) to meet the needs of individuals, which may include developing individual expertise.

There are many excellent texts on team building (see Resources at the end of this chapter). The only point to be made here is that teams will need to address this aspect. The tasks involved in providing assistive technology services can be so overwhelming, that it is easy for the team to neglect building and maintaining their team function. Taking time to learn to work together and to learn effective processes can make the other goal of achieving the task much easier.

SHAR'S TEAM

The first team that met to consider Shar's assistive technology needs was her educational team. It included the teacher from the self contained special education classroom, the general education teacher, the instructional assistant, the speech and language clinician and the Autism specialist. All of these individuals worked with her on a regular basis and were very familiar with her skills and difficulties.

Team Decision Making for Assistive Technology

In addition to valuing each other and being willing to take the time to learn to work together, teams need to develop a set of operating procedures that insure that they can, indeed, work as a team. There are a number of things that are important such as setting norms for starting on time, not interrupting, rotating through key roles such as facilitator, recorder, time keeper, etc. (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). In addition, in making effective assistive technology decisions, one of the most critical components of teamwork is the use of a clearly defined decision making process by the team as they work together to make assistive technology decisions.

Team decision making for assistive technology is a process that can be divided into two parts, 1) gathering information, and 2) analyzing that information to make a decision or recommendation. The information to be gathered starts with the student and his or her specific functional capabilities that may be increased, maintained or improved through the use of assistive technology. Information about the student can be gathered from file reviews, formal or informal testing, interviews with those familiar with the student or observations. In order to have the entire range of information that is needed, teams must be familiar with the environments in which the student typically spends time. This includes the various classroom settings, the lunchroom or the playground, and the home and community settings where she/he engages in activities. If team members are not familiar with all of the environments, someone will need to observe the student in the specific environments to determine what supports are already in place for the tasks/activities in which the student participates (Zabala, 2005).

Once data is gathered, the next step is to analyze the information and make a decision about what assistive technology is most likely to be useful. Making good decisions about the recommendation for use and purchase of assistive technology requires the collaborative efforts of several individuals. Ideally, the team that is assembled to make decisions about assistive technology should include the parent and, when appropriate, the child for whom the assistive technology is being considered. It is critical as well that the parent be an equal, participating member of the team that makes the decisions about what assistive technology to try, not someone who is brought in as a token after the decision has been made (Cook & Polgar, 2007).

Additional members of the team should be selected to provide the necessary information and expertise to make an informed decision. These members need to represent knowledge of the curriculum (often a special education teacher can provide this), knowledge of language development (most appropriately provided by a speech/language pathologist), and motor development (this is often an occupational therapist or a physical therapist). In addition, an administrator who can smooth the way for the implementation of these decisions is an important member. Virtually every decision made about assistive technology requires administrative support, because each one involves the expenditure of district funds for purchase of hardware, software, or training, or the requirement that a staff member learn to operate new equipment or incorporate new strategies and techniques into their service delivery. Good, effective decisions require the input of all of these individual team members. In addition, specific cases may require input from a variety of other service providers who will be involved with the operation or utilization of the assistive technology.

Using an effective decision making process requires team members to acquire and use a variety of skills that are separate from the technical skills they may have needed during the data gathering stage. These include communication skills and group process skills. The communication skills include, but are not limited to active listening, negotiation, providing non-threatening feedback, and accepting criticism without becoming defensive (Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 1993). Group process, includes a variety of group tasks that become important when working as part of a team, one of the most important being the effective use of a formal group decision making process.

The value of using a clearly defined decision making process in team decision making has for many years been identified within the fields of rehabilitation (Brandt & Rice, 1985), education (Gordon, 1977; Schmuck & Runkel, 1994), and early intervention (Prentice & Spencer, 1985). Although awareness of the importance of using a decision making process has been evident in the literature for more than 30 years, most disciplines practicing in the schools, are still not receiving training in this important area. The key elements or steps of an effective decision making process include:

1. Problem Identification-The identification and definition of a specific problem;
2. Solution Generation-The suggestion of possible solutions;
3. Solution Selection-The evaluation of suggestions and choosing of a solution, to create an action plan;
4. Implementation-The carrying out of the plan; and
5. Follow up-Meeting again to evaluate the solution.

None of these steps are especially difficult; the challenge comes in having all members of the team follow the steps together and insuring that all members are actually on the same step at the same time. It is not unusual for team meetings to be conducted in an informal manner with information presented verbally and with little attention paid to the specific steps of the decision making process. When this occurs, individual styles of thinking and communicating can lead to one team member

seeking very specific and minute details of the problem, while another team member is thinking of great solutions and still another is wondering how soon the meeting will be over.

There are several very simple, but effective strategies for improving and formalizing the decision making process used by a team when making assistive technology decisions. The following is a list of strategies and ideas for facilitating team decision making:

Write information for all to see: Present information in written as well as spoken format where everyone on the team can see it. This requires that the key facts are written on a board, flip chart, overhead projector or butcher paper in large print that is visible to all participants. Some team members may feel that this takes unnecessary effort to write every idea up on a board, but it is an extremely effective way to keep each person focused on which step the team is addressing. As information is shared, it is written on the board or chart or projected on a screen. If one of the team members is distracted by something they have forgotten to do, or is called out of the meeting, that person can quickly "catch up" on what was said when. At the same time, if a group member contributes a solution before the team has finished contributing all the information necessary to identify the problem, the recorder can quickly note the "suggested solution" under a section marked Solution Generation, and redirect the entire group back to completing Problem Identification.

Create a shared group memory: Recording what is being said where it is visible to all, adds visual memory to auditory memory and doubles the likelihood that everyone will remember, in the same way, the information that was discussed. This helps create a shared group memory, one that is very similar across all members of the group. It greatly increases the likelihood of follow through from team members.

Share roles and responsibilities: Team members may be hesitant to take a leadership role in conducting team meetings. Rotating roles from one meeting to the next is an effective way to share this responsibility. At each meeting one team member can serve as facilitator while another is recorder and still another acts as time keeper to keep the group moving through the discussion at a pace that will allow the most time at the most important discussion points and keep the team from getting side tracked or bogged down (Fox & Williams, 1991). In addition, this rotation of roles helps insure that each team member recognizes and respects the contribution each of these participants makes to effective decision making.

The Decision Making Process

Step 1: Problem Identification

During Problem Identification it is important for the team to address not only the characteristics of the student, but also of the environments in which the student functions, and the tasks that need to be done. Many times when technology is abandoned, it is because only the physical, psychological, and social characteristics of the child are

addressed, with little or no attention paid to the settings in which the device will be used or the specific tasks that the child really needs to address (Cook & Polgar, 2007). The SETT framework (Zabala, 2005) helps team members to focus on the student (his/her personal characteristics and interests), the environment (including physical characteristics of the setting as well as instructional activities and arrangements), and the task (the specific activities that the target student needs to be able to do in each environment). This focus is helpful in clearly identifying and defining the problem to guide the team as they generate appropriate alternatives and solutions.

Step 2: Solution Generation

When generating solutions, use brainstorming rules to create a climate of trust. This means that all suggestions are written on the board or chart, no comments are allowed and no judgments are passed. The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible. As the flow of ideas slows, it is a good idea to persevere a little longer. Often the second wave of ideas is the most innovative. If everyone is feeling sluggish and suggestions are few, energy may be increased by putting a two-minute time limit in place to get things started. This short time limit combined with writing everything where it can be seen increases the creativity and allows the group to explore as many options as possible. Additional time can be added if the group agrees, but the short time period helps bring that creative, right side of the brain into action.

Step 3: Solution Selection

As alternatives are discussed and evaluated, it may become apparent that some items are very similar or that others make an excellent sequence of steps. New suggestions may be added at any time. This is the place for the team to really discuss the value and relationship of the many suggestions. As individual suggestions are discussed, it is often helpful to group them into "Things we can do tomorrow," "Things we can do in a month," and "Things we may want to consider later." Encourage combining, sequencing and prioritizing**.** The Action Plan is then created to include a time line and persons responsible for each of the solutions or steps that were selected.

When several people work together to reach a decision, there will be many different ideas presented. In ideal situations, the Solution Selection will result in a unanimous agreement about what specific suggestions should be selected for the action plan. Strive to obtain consensus from all participants before adjourning meeting**.** When unanimous agreement is not reached, it is critical that the team arrive at consensus about the action plan that will be implemented. In order to assure consensus, the facilitator must poll individual team members, asking them if they will support this plan even though they may have personally preferred another solution. When the facilitator fails to poll members for consensus, s/he may believe there is unanimous agreement, but actually it is majority rule (a few team members dominating the discussion, while others strongly disagree, but do not speak up), minority rule (one team member dominating the discussion, while others disagree and do

not speak up), or authority rule (no one questioning what the administrator suggested, even though they disagree). When one of these occurs, the chances of successful implementation are decreased.

Step 4: Implementation

Follow the plan completely. For that to happen, everyone on the team needs to be aware of the plan and his/her role in it (Prentice & Spencer, 1985). Unfortunately this does not always happen if teams do not utilize the strategy of writing down important information during each step of the process. Without that "group memory" important details and key responsibilities are easily forgotten or overlooked while meeting the myriad demands of work in school districts. Implementation is the step of the decision making process that tells us whether the solutions we selected are good ones.

Step 5: Follow Up

Follow up on a planned schedule. At a set interval after implementation, follow-up or monitoring must take place. This is another area where school teams frequently fail. The school year can slip quickly by while one team member waits on another to do something or bad weather, illnesses, and absenteeism take their toll. If monitoring does not take place according to the original plan, a variety of problems can crop up and go unaddressed as each team member focuses on their own assignment, but does not have the opportunity to get the "big picture" that comes from a team discussion.

The *Team*work and AT Processes section of the *Education Tech Point* website includes an *Assistive Technology Decision Making Guide* that can be used to guide the team through the steps of the decision making process. Following the simple, but effective steps can be extremely useful to teams in the schools as they strive to make appropriate and effective assistive technology decisions for the students they serve. The Teamwork section also has a team self assessment questionnaire and a collection of strategies for improving the teams skills in using the five step decision making process.

STEVE'S TEAM

Because he was in transition, Steve's team was large. It included his preschool teacher, the vision specialist, the school psychologist and Kindergarten teacher from the receiving district, the director of special education, Steve's mom and dad, the occupational therapist, and the physical therapist.

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RESOURCES

Bugaj, C.R. & Norton-Darr, S. (2010). *The practical and fun guide to assistive technology in public schools: Building or improving your district's AT team*. Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education.

> This easy to read book has practical tips and ideas for developing or improving your AT team. It is full of suggestions written in a light hearted style. Their suggestions for "advertising" AT are innovative and effective.

DeCoste, D. C., Reed, R. & Kaplan, M.W. (2005). *Assistive Technology Teams: Many Ways to do it well.* Roseburg, OR: National Assistive Technology in Education Network

> A report of the data gathered from 55 AT teams across the country who were surveyed. It includes information about how the AT teams developed, how they apportion their time, and the issues and challenges they identified. It can be downloaded from www.natenetwork.org

Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, F.P. (2006). *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*, 9th Edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

> Has a wealth of information including excellent examples and useful exercises and simulations. It provides a very readable explanation of group dynamics with clear and interesting examples that illustrate the application in practical situations. There is real help for conflict and controversial situations, as well specific help with decision making and team building.

TOOLS

in the

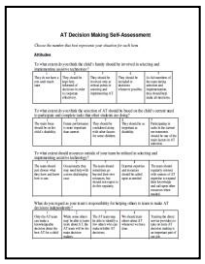
TEAMWORK AND AT PROCESSES SECTION

***of the* Education Tech Points Website**

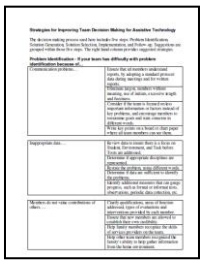
For Use with Students

Assistive Technology Decision Making Guide. (Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative). A guide to the steps of the decision making process. It is not designed to be written on as the information needs to be large enough for all to see.

For Districts/Agencies



Assistive Technology Decision Making Self Assessment. A tool for team members to use to review and discuss their own planning activities. It provides a way to improve processes.



Strategies for Improving Team Decision Making for Assistive Technology. This bank of suggestions is related to the five step decision making process described in this chapter.