CORNER SHOP: ACCESS TECHNOLOGIES GROUP

A Path To Employment

Firm's Software Program Helps People With Cognitive Problems Gain Job Skills

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NEW CANAAN -- Lucy Baney, president and CEO of Access Technologies Group, recalled working recently with a young man in his early 20s.

"If you put him in a room with a group of young women, he'd have lots of hearts going pitty-pat," Baney said. "But after you talked to him - after a few sentences you'd realize he had a cognitive disability."
You wouldn't know it by looking at him, Baney said, but the young man had suffered a traumatic brain injury.

Cognitive disabilities arising from traumatic brain injury, autism or Down syndrome can hinder a person's ability to find and keep a job because of a lack of on-the-job social skills. Yet many people with cognitive disabilities want to work, said Baney, 59, owner of Access Technologies Group, a New Canaan-based company that employs seven. Baney's company has produced a software program designed to help people with cognitive disabilities sharpen their employment skills.

The privately held firm has produced training and management programs and software for companies since 1996. In 2001, Access Technologies Group, in partnership with AT&T, developed a role-playing software program called Simentor aimed at helping AT&T employees improve customer relations and sales skills.

Role-playing is one method for improving interpersonal skills, Baney said. But most adults don't like doing it in front of other people. However, when the role-playing feature is built into a computer program that can be viewed in the privacy of one's home or office, it can be as effective as the real-life version, Baney said.

Three years ago, Access Technologies' patented software caught the eye of one of Baney's acquaintances, Christine M. Casey, 55, an educational consultant with 30 years of experience in education and special education.

Casey believed that Simentor's role-playing feature was an ideal format for people with cognitive disabilities. Casey invited a colleague, Leslie Walker-Hirsch, 59, an expert in the social development of children and adults with cognitive disabilities, to view the software. She, too, saw its potential.

Now the trio, as part of Access Technologies' Social Simentor division, hopes to further refine the software they've developed to help people with autism, Down syndrome and other cognitive disabilities improve their job skills and social abilities.

"People with cognitive disabilities don't lose a job because they can't do the task. It's because they've made some social errors," Walker-Hirsch said.

Social errors can include overreacting to a co-worker's comment or giving an inappropriate response to a customer's request, Baney explained.

"If their job is to stock the shelves with paint cans, they may not respond appropriately when someone asks them to help them find a wrench," Baney said. "They might say `That's not my job,' instead of `I'll find someone to help you.'"

"In general, people expect more from those who have no physical signs of disability, which is often the case with autism or traumatic brain injuries," Baney said.

Last year, with a $75,000 grant from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, the three women created a role-playing software program geared toward people with cognitive disabilities. Called Social Simentor, it allows users to engage in role-playing with on-screen bosses, customers and co-workers.

The program employs images of real people - smiling, frowning, gesturing. Those images are important for people with autism, for example, because they often lack the ability to discern social cues, Baney said.

"They often don't look people in the eyes, or they don't recognize facial expressions," she said.

Learning to interpret facial expressions involves repetition. With a software program, they can replay a scene until they feel comfortable, Walker-Hirsch said.

"Unlike a video, you can't just watch it - you're immersed in the action, as opposed to being a spectator," Walker-Hirsch said. "It's a non-threatening environment. There's no one looking over your shoulder, no one laughing at you if you get it wrong."

In a simulated job interview for an office position, "the boss - Mr. Jones" appears on the screen and asks whether they want the job. Four choices pop up on the screen. Choose the correct response, and Mr. Jones displays a big smile - facial cue!

Choose an incorrect response, such as "I want to work in an office because I enjoy playing computer games," and Mr. Jones responds by frowning.

The women tested their software on 10 young adults with autism, Down syndrome, traumatic brain injuries and other cognitive disabilities.

"They became so involved in it, they forgot they were role-playing, " Walker-Hirsch said.

The software is designed so employers or job coaches can introduce custom role-playing scenarios without having to know computer programming skills.

"You don't have to know how to program. You just need to know how to peck on the keyboard - you can even use one finger," Walker-Hirsch said. "A grocery store chain could make changes to the software so that they can pose people in their uniforms, at one of their check stands, or in a grocery aisle."

"They can even add pictures of their own managers," Baney said. "It can be very specific."

Baney and her two partners are seeking venture capital in hopes of producing an enhanced version of Social Simentor that can be tested on a larger group of people. They hope to produce a final version for the market in 16 to 18 months.

"This could be a very low-priced solution for employers, for schools, for agencies," Casey said. "The job coach teaches someone how to make the hamburger, how to clean the table, but social skills are very seldom taught because they don't have the time. This is a way to give people the time to practice those social skills."

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