

AbilityNet: A Brief History

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# IBM

In 1987 David Morriss, then an IBM UK director, established in IBM Warwick the Support Centre for People with Disabilities, modelled on a centre set up by Mike Armstrong, an IBM vice-president, in Atlanta, Georgia. Its purpose was to encourage the use of computers to help disabled people.

Initially it was comprised of only a small team, with just three full-time people, including Bill Fine, and the service was provided free of charge.

As an experiment, they offered a freephone helpline for use by individuals, customers and IBM staff and by 1991 their work had grown substantially, in volume, scope, expertise and cost. IBM at that time was experiencing severe business challenges and decided that the Centre could not continue in its existing form. It was agreed that it should continue as an independent charity in partnership with the British Computer Society and the University of Birmingham.

Thus, ‘The Computability Centre’ (TCC) was founded and began work in January 1992, with IBM generously contributing funding for a further three years plus office space in Warwick. Each of the three partners provided trustees and David Livermore, another IBM director, was appointed as the first Chairman.

# The Computability Centre (TCC)

The key challenge for TCC was to transform itself from a charitable cost centre into a viable self-funding enterprise.

As their knowledge and experience grew, the team of five began to offer education, training and individual assessments at a fee: the original business plan assumed that these services could be sold centrally through the agency of the Department of the Environment to all local authorities. Unfortunately, the government in 1993 decided to decentralise decision-making for this service and, without a national marketing force, this plan simply became unachievable.

In 1994 John Maitland took over as Chief Executive and he became the architect of the overall strategy which has sustained the charity ever since:

* to provide the free advice and assessment service, which remains the heart and soul of the charity
* to fund this by selling our services to companies, local authorities and government agencies
* and finally to supplement this income with significant fundraising from charitable trusts.

Using this formula, TCC at last achieved financial viability and grew in size and reputation and became recognised as the leading authority in the UK on assistive technology and in Bill Fine had a charismatic and persuasive spokesman on the subject. It came as no surprise, therefore, when Bill was awarded an MBE for his outstanding service to disabled people.

As the organisation grew, it became obvious that TCC was no longer a small local charity but had acquired a national reputation and with it a much broader responsibility for addressing the needs of disabled people throughout the country.

For this reason, in 1996, the Board commissioned a study by the City University of the needs across the country and more specifically the nature and number of organisations offering services in this field. From this it was recognised that only one other organisation was similar to TCC in terms of vision and services and that was the ‘Foundation for Communication for the Disabled’.

This organisation had been founded (and largely funded) by Sir Mark Weinberg in 1985 and had made remarkable contributions, especially with free assessments, building adaptive computer systems, work in education and the development of better and cheaper adaptive software.

The two groups clearly had complementary skills and audiences, and in 1998 they merged to form AbilityNet, to increase both efficiency and effectiveness, with Sir Mark becoming its first President. As their new credo, the new organisation adopted the motto: “never assume limitation”.

# AbilityNet

The original concept was that AbilityNet should grow by becoming a franchised network throughout the country but in practice it proved too difficult for other organisations to achieve AbilityNet’s own level of expertise and viability. Nonetheless over the next twelve years AbilityNet continued to grow and transformed itself into a self-sustaining charity with a national reputation as a leader in assistive technology, enhancing the lives of thousands of people in education, employment and personal life.

It had been hoped that AbilityNet would become the charity-of-choice for the computer industry in the UK and therefore the Board was delighted when Microsoft offered office accommodation on their Reading campus to augment the IBM location in Warwick and facilities in London. Microsoft began to provide a representative as a Corporate trustee in 2008, and, so does The Information Technologists’ Company, along with the existing Corporate Trustee of IBM.

In 2011 Martha Lane Fox (Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho, co-founder of last minute.com and government UK Digital Champion) became our patron.

Large government departments became customers along with major employers and the Advice and Information service continued to deliver help without charge, its telephone and e-mail service augmented by its web site.

AbilityNet consultants extended their scope to include occupational health matters such as back pain and Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI), and the increasingly important and visible issue of web site and software accessibility, where AbilityNet’s expertise, and specifically that of Robin Christopherson, is universally recognised within the industry. Robin was awarded an MBE in 2017 for his services to digital inclusion.

Because of the fluctuation of government policy and the increasingly competitive nature of charitable fundraising, financial pressures have been ever present. However, the organisation has proved remarkably resilient and innovative, adapting to new circumstances as they occur. The fundamental vision remains intact and AbilityNet, as a relatively small organisation, ‘punches way above its weight’, helping directly thousands of disabled people every year and indirectly tens of thousands remotely and via the web every year.

# Where we are now?

AbilityNet has approximately 70 staff with our main offices in London, Reading, Warwick together with 12 DSA centres across the country from Newcastle to Brighton. In 2007 Nigel Lewis was appointed as Chief Executive and in February 2018 Alan Brooks became Chair of Trustees. After 10 successful years, Nigel Lewis resigned and was replaced by Gary Moore.

We continue to deliver assessments to disabled people whether they are in work, home or education. We also work with organisations across the private, public and third sectors, helping them design, build and deliver accessible on-line systems, services and products.

These two services complement each other ensuring individuals can use and get the best from their technology and use/access the systems and online services. Close relationships with “big tech” has both supported our work and helped us to tap into a global network of like-minded professionals focussed on advancing the digital accessibility agenda.

We have around 350 IT volunteers providing free services disabled individuals across the UK through the IT Can Help programme where skilled IT people provide IT support, training and help for disabled and elderly people in their homes across the UK.

This is complemented by our wide range of expert resources (i.e. fact sheets and ‘MyComputerMyWay’) and our Freephone advice and information call line for anyone seeking help with accessible technology challenges.

Our annual TechShare Pro conference has become the UK’s leading focal point for the community of professionals from all sectors who are passionate about digital accessibility and helping disabled people in the workplace.