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Computer Technology Opens a World of Work to Disabled People

By DAVID S. JOACHIM

For 24 years, Pamela Post, a victim of a panic disorder called agoraphobia, has been afraid to leave her house. She managed to find work for a time, at a company partly owned by a man who also had a panic disorder. He gave her a private office in a house, to make her feel at home and to shield her from the office bustle that could bring on attacks.

But three and a half years into the job, even those accommodations were no longer enough. Her husband left her, and her 19-year-old daughter, who drove her to work, married and moved out.

"All of a sudden the [panic attacks](#) got out of control," Ms. Post said. "I don't drive, so I didn't know what I would do."

After a year with no job, she came across Willow, an outsourcing company that was starting a program to train at-home workers to take calls for companies like Teleflora and Palm. Today, she works from home in Deltona, Fla., sets her own working hours and supports herself. And the panic attacks have subsided. "It's been a godsend," she said.

Such arrangements are bringing jobs to thousands of people with disabilities, including those with spinal cord injuries and vision loss. Fast computers and broadband connections have become so inexpensive and reliable that location is now not an issue for certain jobs, like customer service.

At the same time, an abundance of technology is available to help disabled people operate computers, like software that lets a blind person use a keyboard instead of a mouse to navigate a program, and voice synthesizers that turn text into speech. There are also alternatives to the mouse for people with limited use of their arms.

Steven Singley, 41, who is quadriplegic as a result of a car accident 20 years ago, has a special setup that helps him take calls for [Office Depot](#) from his home in Centerville, Utah. His right arm, which has limited movement, is strapped to the armrest of his wheelchair, allowing his hand to pivot on a trackball and his pinky knuckle to tap a clicker. A splint with a rubber tip is hooked to his palm so he can type on

a keyboard sitting on his lap.

"You would think that typing one key at a time would be slow, but I can type 25 words per minute accurately," Mr. Singley said. He puts in 20 to 24 hours a week, requiring extended breaks so his girlfriend can give him his medication and prepare him for his meals.

No one has statistics on just how many disabled people work from home as phone agents. But the market research firm IDC says that about 112,000 home agents — both disabled and not — were working for outsourcing firms like Willow, Alpine Access of Golden, Colo., and J. Lodge of Hammonton, N.J., at the end of 2005. That number is expected to climb to 300,000 by 2010. That does not count employees of companies that hire their own home agents. Many new jobs will go to people who are disabled or to people who care for them, several specialists said, because there are more programs to train them.

These jobs pay relatively well, from about \$10 to \$14 an hour to \$20 an hour for those who earn a commission when taking orders over the phone. Firms like Willow, based in Miramar, Fla., often treat their agents as independent contractors, with no benefits, but many disabled agents qualify for Medicare.

The wages are higher than agents get for similar work in India, where many companies have moved call centers in the last few years, but the costs are still at least 30 percent lower than hiring full-time employees and providing working space for them, said Stephen Loynd, an analyst at IDC. Some executives at outsourcing firms say that the extra expense of hiring American workers is worth it, because many customers complain that offshore agents do not speak English well.

"If you want to find a job where nothing counts but brains and voice, this is it," said Gil Gordon, a consultant in Monmouth Junction, N.J., who advises companies on setting up telecommuting programs.

At the [Internal Revenue Service](#), about 350 disabled workers in 42 states are taking calls this tax season. The I.R.S. and other federal agencies are required to hire people with severe disabilities as part of their compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act. The agency determined that disabled agents could easily handle its seasonal call center, answering requests for tax forms.

The I.R.S. was especially interested in having agents answering calls during peak hours — midday on Mondays and Tuesdays — without having to employ them full time.

"In a traditional call site, they work eight hours a day, five days a week," said Anna Howington, a senior policy analyst at the I.R.S. who oversees taxpayer services. Ms. Howington said she was "absolutely happy" with the quality of the agents' work, which costs the agency about \$5 million a year.

Customer service is not the only job that can be moved into the home. Janet Eckles, 53, of Orlando, Fla., who is blind, works full time for Language Line Services of Monterey, Calif., taking calls from hospitals and courts that need a Spanish translator. Clients call a central number and are routed to either Ms.

Eckles or hundreds of other translators.

Ms. Eckles uses a computer to train other Language Line interpreters over the phone. For that, she uses a Windows program called JAWS, for Job Access With Speech. It is customized to let her navigate her computer using a keyboard rather than a mouse, and it reads the output into one ear while she talks to a trainee, like a television anchorwoman taking cues from a producer.

"It does take some getting used to," she said.

Some call center operators have found that disabled workers stay in their jobs longer and are more loyal than other workers. They also tend to be older and better educated, and they will work for less. "This is an untapped pool of labor that doesn't have many other options," said M. J. Willard, who runs the National Telecommuting Institute in Boston, an advocacy group that trains disabled workers for jobs.

About 6.5 million people receive disability benefits from the Social Security Administration, and about a million disabled people are registered with state agencies looking for work. "A lot of those people can work from home," Ms. Willard said. She works with state vocational rehabilitation programs to help them find work. She has about 500 workers in her program and expects to add 50 a year. Because the jobs in Ms. Willard's program are often seasonal, employment may be sporadic for many workers. She also helps employers claim tax benefits and grants for hiring disabled workers.

There are limits, though, to the ability to work while drawing disability benefits. Those who qualify for federal disability insurance cannot earn more than \$860 a month after completing a nine-month trial period, or they lose disability payments, which average \$938 a month.

Garth Howard, chief executive of the outsourcing firm Alpine Access, says he moved many customer service jobs overseas as an executive at [American Express](#) and [TeleTech Holdings](#). Now, he says, technology is helping him hire disabled workers at competitive wages because he can offer them a measure of convenience that was not available just a few years ago.

"I'm excited to be able to bring some jobs back," he said.

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