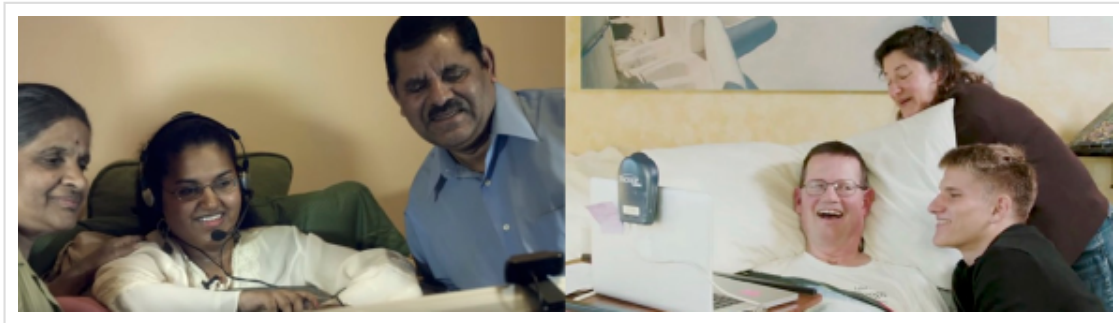


Telework: The Accommodation that Opens New Doors to People with Disabilities

Posted on [August 14, 2015](#) by [Beam](#)



Organizations around the world are employing remote workers for services such as customer support, software development, writing, design and media. But there still remains a stigma for people with office jobs who request the option to work from home.

Today's news of telework features headlines about [men utilizing the privilege more than women](#), questions about telework practices at the [USPTO](#), and tactics on how to [convince your boss](#) that it's a good idea. These articles tend to focus on workers and managers who have choices about exactly where and when they can get to an office. But they overlook a potentially valuable source of labor – people with disabilities – who can use new technologies to communicate, attend meetings and interact within office settings. While these people may find their conditions restrict their physical movement, technologies can connect them to professional settings, freeing them to contribute.

Technology's Role in Advancing the ADA

The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) became law in 1990 to grant people with disabilities “the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in mainstream American life – to enjoy employment opportunities, to purchase goods and services, and to participate in State and local government programs and services.” This year marks the ADA's 25th anniversary, an occasion that included an event at [The White House](#) in July 2015.

Even as the ADA requires employers to make reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities to work effectively, many people with severe physical limitations cannot enjoy the fulfillment that work provides. There have been many advances, from motorized wheelchairs to speech generating apps that help people move and communicate. What if

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technology could push those boundaries even further, to oper

The examples of two remarkable people, Henry Evans and Ka demonstrate the power of technology to lower barriers, cultivate the potential of people whose intelligence illuminates what they cannot.

Seeing and Hearing Henry as an Equal

Henry Evans of Los Altos, Calif., is a Stanford MBA with experience at Valley tech companies until a stroke-like event struck him at work, leaving him mute, quadriplegic, and is cared for by his family at home. He represents an important percentage of the disabled population, leaving home (an ADA compliant building) is often unsafe, inconvenient, or impossible. In his personal experiences beyond his home, Henry started a program called [ROBOTS4Humanity](#) to test new technologies and raise awareness about their potential to bring new capabilities to the disabled community. In his [TEDx](#) talk, which Henry presented using a Beam Smart Presence System from [Suitable Technologies](#), he describes his elation to feel equal with his friends once again:

*“The primary reason Smart Presence is so important for disabled people is that, **if you can speak**, no one has to know you are disabled and they don’t have a chance to treat you differently (even subconsciously). This is even more so the case when a lot of able-bodied people also use Smart Presence devices. These devices, which show only your head, create for the first time a truly level playing field for people with physical disabilities.” – [Henry Evans](#)*

Beam Stories: Henry Evans "walks again" using Smart Presence  



Henry hopes the technologies that enable telework, like telepresence, give employers

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additional tools to maximize the productivity of a person with a disability – as well as the incentive to find tasks suitable for those individuals. They provide both parties – worker and organization – the opportunity to optimize a person’s net contribution. In Henry’s view, this can only encourage employers to proactively target people with disabilities for employment. And he’s not alone in his belief, gained through experience, that these technologies can make a life-changing – and work-enabling – impact.

A Catalyst for Kavita’s Doctoral Thesis

[Kavita Krishnaswamy](#), who lives with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA), has never walked or crawled. Though she relies on 24/7 care in her Maryland home, Kavita is a Computer Science doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and her research goals include increasing independence for people with disabilities using machine learning, artificial intelligence, brain-computer interfaces (BCIs), telepresence, speech recognition, and other robotic technologies to improve quality of life.

Kavita requires physical assistance from her mother, Pushpa Krishnaswamy, and other caregivers. She was able to physically go to campus in her undergraduate years, with her mother in attendance for each class, but at home her mother cares for the whole family and struggles to both fund and find reliable caregivers who can work around the clock. Kavita has been unable to leave her home in recent days, leaving her only with a laptop computer as means to participate in her world.

Despite these difficult circumstances, and with her mother’s help and dedication, Kavita has managed to work at IBM, Silver Hill Technology, Knexus Research, and the Quality of Life Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University. The key accommodations that helped her to effectively fulfill her responsibilities were the ability to telecommute, have a flexible schedule, and utilize highly collaborative tools such as video calling, distributed revision control systems, chat messengers, and email.

Recently, Kavita has been using Beam Smart Presence on the UMBC campus to attend class and defend her thesis. The Beam provides her the face-to-face interaction and ambulation needed to attend events talks, seminars, and conferences in cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, and Barcelona. (She has even attended [museum](#) exhibits.) The telepresence capability empowers her to contribute her skills and experience to a variety of organizations:

“The Beam gives me independence to be visible in the community to explore and expand technological boundaries from my home; to exchange ideas with high-achieving entrepreneurs, innovative researchers, and industry leaders to make progress in my research. The Beam bridges the physical gaps between my home and any other location in the world in an immersive real-time experience to meet, learn, and network with professionals all over the world. I can best contribute to the human capacity to achieve the highest potential in the field of computing with assistive technologies society to develop robotic technologies to make life better and inclusive for all. Together, we can change the world with increased accessibility.” – [Kavita Krishnaswamy](#)

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A Life-Changing Impact

By deploying collaborative technology and telepresence, Henry and Kavita are realizing opportunities to act upon their passions. Both bestow the hope that everyone with a disability can contribute their knowledge and skills to more employers.

As Internet-based technologies continue to redefine where work happens, Kavita and Henry will continue to encourage people who live with disability to use technology for expanding their interactions with the world, so that new doors may open to them, and so they can achieve career advancement with meaningful employment and independence.

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