

Augmented Communicators on Work



This issue is about getting and keeping a job. At the USSAAC¹ conference in 1997, three men who use voice output communication devices gave a much discussed presentation about work. What Gus Estrella, Rick Hohn and Mick Joyce had to say is so important that we decided to dedicate this issue of *Alternatively Speaking* to excerpts from their talk. Gus² works at United Cerebral Palsy as a policy fellow. Rick³ is an AAC consultant with Sentient Systems Technology, Inc., and Mick⁴ is a consumer education consultant for the Academy for Quality in Community Services. Any AAC consumer who is looking forward to employment should note these words, as these men are among the very small minority of AAC users who have found remunerative employment. As we shine the spotlight on my guests, I am happy to welcome my talented colleagues to *AS*.

We start with Gus talking about selecting a career.

Gus—On Choosing a Career

“Let’s talk about assistive technology and careers. Obviously, if you have a significant



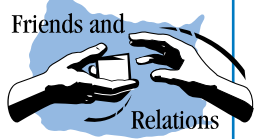


disability you are going to pick something that you can do. Personally, I knew becoming a glass blower was simply out of the question! I could have attempted that career choice, but something told me that I would have had to find a female plastic surgeon to marry me and not worry about the cost!

“Seriously, during my four years of high school I didn’t have the luxury of high tech devices. My assistive technology consisted of a plastic word board, a fifty-year-old typewriter and several able bodies, called teacher aides.

“These days students have the opportunity of having and experimenting with assistive technology and seeing for themselves that there is no limit to what people can accomplish if they have the determination and the technology to help them reach their career goals!

“We need to look at abilities. By abilities I mean what people are good at, what their disability allows them to do, and what assistive technology they might use to help them accomplish their career goals. My goal was to get a college degree. I can’t say what the best path for anyone else would be.

“After graduating from college, I used what I had to get where I am now. What I had was a lifetime of experience dealing with a significant disability, cerebral palsy, including a speech disability. I also had an augmentative communication device and other assorted assistive technology. Some of you are thinking, 'That’s not much,'

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Message from the author

Even though I have dysarthric speech, I've always had a bit of ham in me. I taught, performed and spoke in front of audiences for years with the assistance of an interpreter or reader. But one afternoon I found myself in a state of sweating euphoria, facing an audience armed only with my wits and a primitive voice-output communication device, poised for my first solo flight as a speaker. What an exciting time this was—new ideas were coming into the field of speech-language pathology. Voice-output devices were becoming portable for the first time. The concept of AAC was beginning to drip into our consciences.

John Eulenberg of Michigan State University convened one of the first AAC conferences in Berkeley, California. I made my solo debut at that affair; I gave a two-minute speech that took about six hours to record, phoneme by phoneme. I was rather pleased with myself.

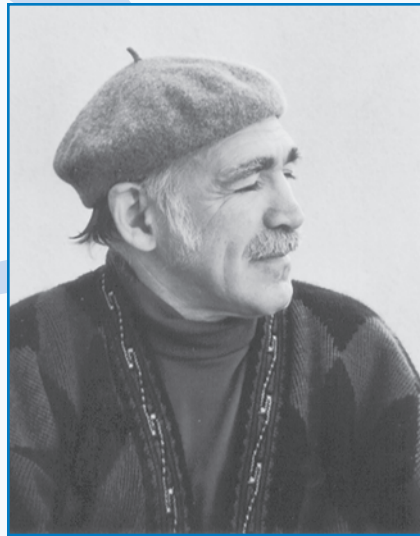
Today, I do public speaking at the drop of a hat. It is commonplace for augmented communicators to give speeches at conferences. Some of these talks are really good. Much can be learned from

listening to the experiences of other augmented communicators.

Unfortunately, many of these talks die with the end of the conference. I think it is time for this to change. From time to time I hope to present excerpts from some of the more noteworthy presentations given by augmented communicators.

We begin with a panel discussion given at the 1997 USSAAC conference in Baltimore, Maryland. Three fully-employed augmented communicators talked about work. This is not your usual theoretical mumbo jumbo, but practical information from the front lines of employment. Listen up and learn.

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and you would be correct. But that got me my first full-time job after college! It didn't happen overnight, though. I started off as a substitute teacher. That's right, a substitute teacher, which is an experience that everybody should have at least once!

"My point here isn't that I got a job, it's that I used the limited abilities that I had, along with the little assistive technology that the great state of Arizona had given me, to get ahead in this crazy world of ours. Those of you who know me are thinking, and a little BS! Well, of course. Isn't that what makes the world go 'round?'"

Rick—On Choosing a Career

"I feel sorry for people that don't enjoy doing their jobs. For them, work is a drudgery.

"But it is not supposed to be like this. In fact, my pastor tells members of his congregation that if they don't enjoy what they are doing to find something else that they could have fun in.

"I love working as a consultant, a public speaker, a writer and an artist. I thoroughly have a blast in all these things.

"My first job was as an art teacher for adults with disabilities. I enjoyed painting as a hobby. Besides, I was selling a painting or two every month. I knew that I would like teaching art because I love explaining things.

"I enjoyed teaching art for three years, but the agency that contracted my services downsized and cut back my classes. So I was looking for something else to do. I believed that I could work in the

AAC field because whenever I got a spare moment I went to my nonverbal students to try to improve their communication systems. Helping like this was a real interest to me. I could not wait to get to these students on a one-to-one basis. So after going for an interview at Sentient Systems Technology, I took the job they offered me to work as a consultant.

“Just plain interest, genuine enthusiasm and the willingness to ask for opportunities play a vital role in finding employment and choosing a career.”

Gus—On Finding a Job

“I want to talk about the people you meet and the contacts you can make during your educational experience which could lead to a job in the near future.

“After college, I wasn’t having any luck finding a job. Granted, finding a job with a degree in creative writing isn’t the easiest thing to do. A friend who is a teacher suggested that I get my Substitute Teaching Certificate and work for her whenever she took a personal day off. These are the key words: “a friend.” Someone I knew. This friend was a special ed teacher when I was going to high school.

“The people I met and contacts I made during this time of my life were the keys that opened doors for me. A friend whom I met when I was going to high school gave me an idea about getting employed after college. Once I had started substituting, people who worked in the school district noticed me and how the students with disabilities, especially those

students using AAC devices, were reacting to my presence in the classroom. So now, not only my friend knew me and how the students were reacting, but so did others who worked for the district. Knowing this, my friend suggested that they should hire me to work for the district as a mentor to work with students with disabilities, especially with students who were using AAC devices.

“Months later, I became a full-time employee with the district. My point here isn’t that I got a job, but it’s the way I obtained a job. It all started with someone I met when I was in high school.”

Rick—On Positive Thinking

“What does a potential employer see when he looks at someone in a wheelchair? Does he look at the chair and associate it with problems and burdens? Or does the employer bypass the chair and look at the person in it, realizing that tremendous potential awaits?

“Having a positive attitude and being enthusiastic about life is as important as education and experience. I know people who sit around feeling sorry for themselves and lead very unproductive lives. To me, they are handicapped, not disabled.

“What are some of the ways to help an employer discover the abilities of a potential employee?

“First, I never bring up my disability as an issue. I never assume or take the attitude that just because I have a disability I automatically will be hired for a job just because there are laws that make discrimi-



nation illegal. The employer does not owe you a living, and no law will force an employer to give you a job just because of your disability.

“Second, I find ways to show the potential employer that I am independent. Showing up by myself and arranging my own transportation is always a big plus.

“Third, I research the position that I am applying for. Is there anything exciting about the job that I can discuss with the potential employer?

“Fourth, I anticipate questions that the employer will likely ask and prepare responses in advance.

“While discriminatory practices exist toward people with disabilities, positive attitudes and the above four tips can lead an employer to believe that people with augmentative devices can be an asset to the workforce and to his or her company.”

Mick—On Interviewing

“How do you prepare for an interview? I’ve prepared for interviews many times, worthlessly. Some looked at me and were totally grossed out. In my part of

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the country there are three kinds of interviews:

1. The ones that are fixed.
2. The ones that are fixed for someone else.
3. The ones that they don't know what in Sam Hill is going on.

If they're fixed for you, it doesn't matter what you say, you got the job. They may coach you a bit on what to say. Like don't say you're a card-carrying member of the K.K.K. But it's pretty much set.

"In the second situation, no matter what you say, you don't have the job. It's set up for another person. They're just going through the formalities. They go out for a big lunch afterwards. I went to some of these just to get the dope on what's happening. There are easier ways to get information. But sometimes this may be the only way to find out what you need to know. It may set you up for the next round. Or it may tell you who's got the money.

"In the third situation, they're going to want someone who is safe. Few people perceive augmented communicators as safe. My boss doesn't even think I am safe and jumps when I reach for my joy stick.

"This is my reality; I have to work in that reality. You may have a different sense of reality. Cronyism may not be that hard-core in your town, but, in most towns, people hire who they trust. They hire who they think can do the job and can score the most political brownie points. That's just the way it is. All of my jobs were fixed with one exception.

"Here are some practical suggestions on how to fix jobs.

"First, you have to do some planning. Ask yourself:

- What can I do?
- What can't I do?
- What can I maybe do?
- What am I good at?
- What can I do but prefer not to do?

Put your answers in a grid.

"Second, make a list of employers that may need these things.

"Third, find out who's got money—not just operational money, but extra money, money they can afford to take risks with. Now, we all know they aren't taking risks, but they may think so.

"Fourth, build some political leverage. Even a small amount may help. And along with that, get to know people who can hire you. Stalk them. Find out what they like and dislike. Find out where they go and go to events that are important to them. Talk to their secretary. Study them. Be their friend, if possible. Get them used to your presence. I know this is hard to do, but do it. I have about ten of these people in Madison, Wisconsin where I live."

A

Mick—On Potential Employers

"The trouble with employment situations, and about all other situations I can think of, is that people tend to dwell on the disability, not the person. They dwell on the wheelchair, not the person in it; the drooling, not the moist and tender lips; the facial contortion, not the deep urging eyes. What a pity to miss all this! Along with this, they miss the brain that seems to burn with sun spots every time the word money is mentioned.

"To impress someone, you have to find out what their interests are and talk about them. Talk about your interests as well. Only then will they attempt to see all of you.

"What's there to talk about? Try sports. That's always a safe subject to let people know you're connected to the world. For example, how about them Packers? Will they, again, make it to the Super Bowl? Damn right, they will. How about the Bulls without Dennis Rodman? That's like a day without sunshine. And the Brewers? It will be a while. But, boy, when they get that new stadium, you're going to see some real baseball!

"Should you talk about politics? Not so safe, but it holds interest. Money from the Far East, Paula Jones and the Whitewater probe are a few topics. Is Susan McDougal the last political prisoner? Keep it high on national

TALKING TO EMPLOYERS

issues. State issues are too close to home. I could go on, but you get the idea.

“Other possible topics are fashion, God, UFOs, pets, kids, music, TV, movies, sex in general, books, art and the weather. I just gave you ten topics that are fairly safe.

When you are in someone’s office, take a look around. That will tell you what to talk about. If you see cats, boot up your cat file. If you see fish, boot up the fishing file. Don’t get carried away. Only go as far as they want to go, or you may be classified as a computer blabbermouth.

“Therapists could help clients make up some of these files. For example, fishing is good up at Lake Wantabe, or Lake Manipee, and name several other lakes. The walleyes are biting like there’s no tomorrow. Bass, perch, marlin, sharks or delightful crab cakes at Crab City make eating worth it. The cheesecake at Clyde’s is wonderful. There’s a waiter at Gus’s who looks and moves like Sharon Stone. (Say this only to the guy who graduated from the Citadel.)

“One more thing. Don’t sell yourself out completely. Being male, my topics would be different from a woman’s. Always bring out a little of yourself.

“Perhaps in the near future we’ll see device makers, or someone, being a little more helpful in creating some files to help with

interviews. For example, a program could be written that allowed you to type in answers to different questions, and then created its own phrase files.

“Last tip: Pray as if it all depends on God and work as if it all depends on you.”



Rick—On Employers

“We live in a very fast paced society, and anything that we AAC users can do to speed up our communication will only enhance our careers. Here are some tips that I try to do to make the best use of my time and my employer’s time:

“1. Build a list of general phrases to use most of the time and store them in your augmentative device. Include social pleasantries.

“2. Store phrases to say at the workplace. This includes things

that you say everyday to do your job or to talk to your colleagues.

“3. To say something that you don’t already have pre-programmed, press a button that says, “Please be patient as I compose a message to speak to you.” This insures that the person you are going to speak with won’t leave while the message is being prepared.

“On the other hand, if you want to free the person’s time, pre-program something like, “I am going to compose a message to speak to you, but until I finish please resume what you were doing.” The person generally appreciates this consideration. He may continue his job or strike up an idle conversation, but you have won his respect.

“4. If you have a lengthy idea to give your employer or colleagues, put it into a document in your AAC device in advance. Share it when you both have time to talk.

“5. Along the same lines, after preparing a lengthy statement, consider leaving it as either a voice mail or email message.

“These strategies have worked well for me, especially since I work out of my home on the West Coast, and the company that I work for is on the East Coast.

“These, and other common sense practices, will bring treasures to you as you value both your time and your employer’s time.”

A

Beyond Work

Editor's note: Handling social situations in the workplace is an important part of anyone's job. The casual conversation you might have around the water cooler in the morning may effect how you work in the afternoon. That drink you have with your buddies after quitting time could have some bearing on your next raise or promotion. These are the things people never tell you about because they are so focused on teaching you the process of a particular job.

Gus is one of the most social people I know. He can blow fascinating hot air in your face with the best of them. Here he discusses what goes on beyond work and why this is just as important to you as the job itself.

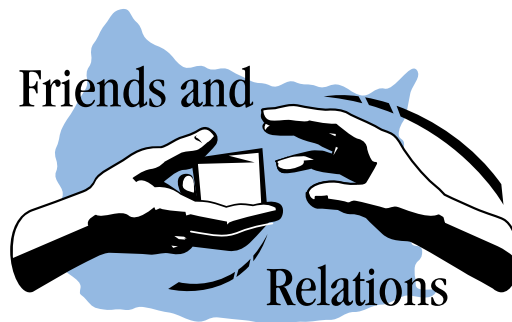
By Gus Estrella

Assistive technology plays a vital role in the lives of individuals with significant disabilities when it comes to socializing. I think I could safely say that almost everybody likes being sociable and going to different social functions. Being sociable is important. People like to interact with people their own age who have similar interests. The same can be said for people with significant physical disabilities, including those with significant speech disabilities. Imagine that ... people with disabilities being sociable!

For many reasons, it is very important to people to be accepted by their peers. Generally this occurs when people start talking with each other when they go out for a drink or dinner, or when they just start hanging out together swapping stories.

For some, the idea of people with significant disabilities being social could be a totally new concept! Most people don't have

to worry about little things like mingling with others, getting around or even having a drink and eating at social functions. They just do it. But if you have a



disability that includes a significant speech disability, social acceptance by your peers is going to take longer, or it might not happen at all.

A person has to be able to converse and carry on a somewhat decent conversation. Now, if you're a person with a significant speech disability, this simple task won't be that simple. Some people might have difficulty

relating to you due to the fact that there's no real communication between you! Plus, something tells me that your peers won't be that willing to play Twenty Questions to figure out that they have to play Twenty Questions if they want to talk to you!

Here's where assistive technology, especially AAC devices, come into the picture. An AAC device with speech output makes it easier to carry on a conversation.

Anyway, my point is, if you're a person with a significant speech disability and have access to an augmentative communication device with speech output, then your peers are going to be more willing to converse with you. Once that conversational door is open, your wit and charm will establish you as an equal. This is just one example of how assistive technology contributes to social equality, and that's what it's all about!

S



Think Big

Last summer my partner, Carole, and I were honored to receive the annual “Joe Award” at the Pittsburgh Employment Conference for Augmented Communicators.⁵ I took the opportunity to say a few words about employment. The issue I addressed is an important one for augmented communicators to consider. What follows is the text of my speech.

It is a real pleasure to be accepting this award with Carole, who has been my partner for more than twenty years. Although she has toiled faithfully in the fields of disability rights since long before meeting me, she is invariably known as Michael Williams’ wife. I hope this award will start to change this perception.

Ladies and gentleman, to have the names Krezman & Williams added to the pantheon of past Joe Award winners is a great honor indeed. I hope we are both worthy of being next to Lyle Lloyd, Colleen Haney and David Yoder. Another reason I am delighted to receive this award is that I have yet another opportunity to address you all. By you, I mean the augmented communicators in the room. In deciding what I wanted to say to you today, I went back and read some of my old ACOLUG⁶ messages. Yes, dear

friends, I confess to being some sort of an electronic pack-rat. If it’s been on the Internet, it’s probably on my hard disk.

Some time ago, several of you regular ACOLUGers expressed a desire to go to work for your favorite AAC manufacturer. Now, on the face of it, there is nothing wrong with this goal. I’ve had similar thoughts myself. But have you ever really considered why you want to go to work for an AAC manufacturer? Perhaps you think it will be an easy line of work. After all, you know that device of yours forwards and backwards. You probably can program it better and faster than most of the professionals here today. And you no doubt have a thousand ideas to improve the device. These are all good reasons to want to go to work for your favorite manufacturer.

But I want to suggest that there may be another deeper reason behind your desires. Could it be that you want to work for an AAC manufacturer because you know that you will be treated like a regular human being there? There is no need to go through any of those complicated song and dance routines about your disability. You can relax. Do your job. Blend in.

Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? And it would be wonderful. But it also would be a cop-out. For the brutal truth of the matter is, there are more of us than there are of them. Even if AAC manufacturers hired all the augmented communicators they could, and, make no mistake about it, I think manufacturers should be hiring augmented communicators, there wouldn’t be enough jobs for all of us.

Let’s face it, folks. The chances of any one of us being hired on for a full-time job at an AAC manufacturer are about as great as the average inner-city kid getting on a team in the National Basketball Association. We augmented communicators need to set our sights beyond the disability ghetto in which we find ourselves, and reach out to that wider world that’s out there. That is where the money is. That is where the power is. That is where we want to be.

If we are going to dream, let’s do it big. Let’s not be limited by what we think we can do, let’s consider possibilities that may be beyond our grasp. Let’s reach for the stars. We won’t touch them, but we may find something worth keeping along the way.

A

Heading for Work

Most young people want to have their own homes and families when they grow up. Getting a good job can help make this happen. Preparing for a good job requires education and experience. I asked some young people what jobs they do to get that all-important work experience.⁷

L.D., age 11

- Dusts non-breakable areas with a featherduster .
- Walks the dog in the afternoons.
- Fold towels on laundry day .

J.D., age 10

- Regularly helps his grandfather water plants outside.
- Brings up the garbage cans from the curb on trash days.

B.S., age 8

- Hoses off the patio.
- Feeds the ducks at their pond.
- Uses adapted equipment to help in the kitchen.

Candice, age 8

- Puts away her own clothes if her dresser drawers are open.
- Helps sort the family laundry .
- Puts away smaller toys that scatter through the house.
- Cooperates and works hard in physical therapy .
- Does homework.
- Remembers her library book on Wednesday .
- Reminds her mother to give her lunch money for school.

Send me a fax or e-mail and tell me about your jobs.



The next issue will be about education.

What do you do at school during recess?

You can write to me: Michael Williams, Augmentative Communication, Inc. One Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, California 93940.

You can send me a fax at (408) 646-5428.

You can send me electronic mail at mbwill@well.com

Sources & Resources

1. USSAAC is the United States Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. USSAAC is the United States chapter of ISAAC, the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. www@isaac-online.org
2. Gus Estrella. United Cerebral Palsy Associations, 1660 L Street, N.W., Suite 700, Washington, D.C. 20036. phone: 800-872-5827 fax: 202-776-0414 email: funspastic@ucpa.org
3. Rick Hohn. 1125 Cottontail Road, Vista, CA 92083. 760-598-8336. rickstalk@juno.com
4. Mick Joyce. 4 North Allen St., Madison, WI 53705. phone/fax: 608-238-9549 mjoyce@facstaff.wisc.edu
5. The Pittsburgh Employment Conference for Augmented Communicators (PEC@) is sponsored by SHOUT, Inc. P.O. Box 9666, Pittsburgh, PA 15226. phone: 800-934-4391 email: SHOUT9666@AOL.COM
6. ACOLUG is a listserve for augmented communicators and their supporters. To join ACOLUG, email Graciela Slesarsky-Poe at graciela@astro.ocis.temple.edu
7. Thanks to Verna Horvath, Gail Van Tatenhove, and Laura Warburg.

PEC@ August 7-9, 1998

Employment, Marriage & Sexuality

87 augmented communicators talked about work at PEC@ 97.