



## Occupational therapists, technology users

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**To cite this article:** Michèle Verdonck (2014) Occupational therapists, technology users, World Federation of Occupational Therapists Bulletin, 69:1, 6-6, DOI: [10.1179/otb.2014.69.1.002](https://doi.org/10.1179/otb.2014.69.1.002)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1179/otb.2014.69.1.002>



Published online: 20 Nov 2014.



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## Guest Editorial

# Occupational therapists, technology users

We are all users of technology both simple and complex. We use eye-glasses and smartphones, walking sticks and cars, pens and laptops. As occupational therapists we are concerned with occupation which involves the use of these technologies. When technology is used to enable occupation in a practice setting we may refer to this technology as “assistive”. However, today’s digital world offers a merging of mainstream and assistive technologies and the division is becoming less apparent. One may even argue that all technology is in fact “assistive”. As citizens of the world we are all able to understand the use of technology of various forms from our personal perspective. This inherent understanding empowers us to be technogeeks not technophobes (Verdonck and Ryan 2008). As occupational therapists we aim to be person-centred which involves understanding occupation and indeed technology from the users’ perspective. Adopting the view of assistive technology as a universal experience of technology, I present four ideas reflective of our shared personal experiences of living with technology – both assistive and mainstream.

### **The personal meanings and experiences of using technology can be contradictory**

The experience of assistive technology has been described as a love/hate relationship with associated ambivalent meanings (Lupton and Seymour 2000). Technology can be both an enabler and a disabler. Hägglom-Kronlöf and Sonn (2007) presented users’ attitudes towards their technology as contradictory. Assistive technology was considered to be: pleasant and also unpleasant; usable and inappropriate; aiding respect and making one feel afraid, normal and as well as a sign of old age; essential and cumbersome; safe but unsafe; not minding and also finding them embarrassing. For some using technology may involve a feeling of resignation when there appears to be no alternative. In contrast there are several ‘power users’ who appear to embrace and display their confidence and comfort as users. Use is a personal transaction based on the question, “is it worth using?”

### **Using technology involves effort, challenge and frustration**

Consider using a smartphone for the first time. Using technology is not an easy seamless experience. It involves hassle and frustration but successful use in turn can be engaging. If users are supported they can overcome the hassle and incorporate technology into their daily lives. As occupational therapist incorporating technology use we may tend to highlight the benefits. Instead it may be more beneficial to focus on the realistic process of technology adoption, which

requires effort to overcome the challenges involved allowing incorporating technology into daily life.

### **Technology can be fun**

Watching TV, listening to music, conversation and playing games are all enjoyable activities enabled through technology. This enjoyment is in contrast with the challenge mentioned above. Overcoming the hassle involved in learning to use devices and incorporate them into lives can be satisfying. In addition simple aimless use of technology itself can be enjoyable especially for those who are unable to physically do anything without technology. ‘Playing’ with technology does not always need to be productive but can be meaningful. Enjoyment is not widely reported in AT literature, but as users we all know that we can have fun using technology. I have often observed the enjoyment of using technology both mainstream and assistive.

### **Non-use is an acceptable and expected outcome**

We have all chosen to do without some form of ‘useful’ technology in our lives. There is a focus in the literature on non-use or abandonment of assistive technology. I favour the term ‘non-use’ as ‘abandonment’ has connotations of blame and failure. While the reasons for non-use are varied most can be explained as ‘not worth the hassle’. All technology users adopt a transactional approach to incorporating technology into their lives (Krantz 2012). As long as the choice is based on a realistic experience of the technology non-use should be considered a successful outcome.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the ideas above may enable one to better understand the application of technology in occupational therapy settings with a focus on the person and their occupations rather than a technology-focused approach. If we as occupational therapists view technology as a universal experience that we all share, we should be better equipped to understand assistive technology without having to be committed “technogeeks”.

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