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**Conquering the Challenges of the Workplace
for People with Disabilities**

With the vast array of assistive technology devices today, people with disabilities are able to share, even to scale, their job skills and expertise. Their jobs and independent living skills are not limited to the workings of their bodies or the limits of their physical places with the advancements in technological areas such as augmentative communication technology, vehicle modifications and sensory aids.

Because of new assistive technology tools and resources, the workforce has opened wider to include people with all abilities in a vast array of careers with better ways do their jobs. These assistive tools have revolutionized the marketplace and awakened industries to the skills and talents of people with disabilities.

One such talented employee is Susan Beck, who works in the accounts receivable division of Piedmont Service Group, a company that specializes in energy efficient HVAC solutions for clients throughout the Piedmont region of Virginia and the Carolinas.

Susan has retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a genetic disease that destroys the retina of the eye. Although born with RP, Susan’s symptoms did not appear until age 19 and it was several years before she had a clear-cut diagnosis. There is no known cure.

But as Susan rattles off success after success in her personal and professional life, you quickly realize nothing has stopped her from living a full life. She loves her “gadgets” as she calls the assistive technology devices she uses both at work and at home.

On the job she uses computer software called Zoom to change the size, color and font of any text as well as offer speech enhancements for text. Her computer settings provide high print and background contrast, allowing her to more easily see documents and spreadsheets. Hard copy print pieces also present a challenge for Susan so she utilizes a closed caption monitor which projects the print onto her computer screen with large type and high contrast.

Her cell phone, boasting a high contrast screen, also holds voice apps for reading her emails or sharing items sent to her. On the go, Susan pulls out her video magnifier allowing her to see documents handed out in meetings. She uses a Victor Reader Stream recorder which allows her to carry notes, audio books and her favorite music. Her watch has a variety of alarms and also “talks” to Susan, reminding her of appointments, time to leave work, etc.

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Susan worked with the Services for the Blind for her assistive technology equipment. In addition to the items she uses for work, she also has a closed caption monitor, a talking bathroom scale and kitchen timer at home as well as raised marker (braille-like stickers) on her dishwasher, washer and dryer and her stove to find her perfect settings. She has a talking “color wand” that she can place on her articles of clothing to create color-coordinated outfits for work, church and her Red Hat Chapter outings. She utilizes a braille label maker to mark her medicine bottles.

Susan is not shy about using all her assistive devices to do her best job of succeeding at work and at life. She earned her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in accounting from the University of Phoenix, previously worked for Siemens Corporation for 12 years, and has been at Piedmont Service Group for four years.

Assistive technology’s price tag should not be a hindrance to those ready to advance in their education and workplaces. A variety of national organizations such as the League for the Blind and Easter Seals have funds for those who meet their specific qualifications. In addition, national companies including Bank of America and Chrysler Corporation offer assistance.

In North Carolina, various foundations and organizations also offer assistive technology funding such as the O’Berry Center Foundation in Goldsboro, the State Employees Association of North Carolina in Raleigh, and the Roberts-Miller Fund in Gastonia. A list of these and more resources can be found at: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/vocational-rehabilitation-services/north-carolina-assistive-technology-program/assistive>

Sustaining a company’s relevance in the changing world, one relying heavily on advances in technology, needs the people using the technology on the front line. More employers are beginning to see a huge untapped market in people with disabilities who have great talents to share in the work world, just like Susan does.

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**About Everybody Works NC**

The *Everybody Works NC* campaign is increasing awareness of the untapped pool of talent found in the disability community and creating more and more job opportunities for people with disabilities. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) which kicks off the year-long *EveryBody Works NC* campaign with a statewide speaking tour, media relations programs, social media and a series of special events. For more information, visit [*everybodyworksnc.com*](http://everybodyworksnc.com/).

The campaign is led by the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities (NCCDD), the North Carolina Business Leadership Network (NCBLN) and North Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation (NCVR) to promote and support inclusive workforce strategies.