Using the AT Decision-Making Guide

When the members of the team who have been assigned to gather information have completed their tasks, the team is ready to come together for the next step. The information gathering may have included reviewing the files, contacting previous service providers, completing a specific test that someone felt would provide important information, or observing. In decision making this information will be used to guide the direction and content of the decision.

Decision-making takes place at a meeting. The tool to be used is the AT Decision-Making Guide. This guide is a single page that leads the team through a five-step decision making process. Using an effective decision-making process requires team members to acquire and use a variety of skills that are separate from the technical skills they may have needed during the data gathering stage. These include communication skills and group process skills. The communication skills include, but are not limited to active listening, negotiation, providing non-threatening feedback, and accepting criticism without becoming defensive. The last skill area is group process. It includes following a schedule, reaching consensus, and a variety of tasks that become important when working as part of a team, one of the most important being the effective use of a formal group decision making process.

The key elements or steps of an effective decision making process include:

1. **Problem Identification:** The identification and definition of a specific problem
2. **Solution Generation:** The suggestion of possible solutions
3. **Solution Selection:** The evaluation of suggestions and choosing of a solution to create an action plan
4. **Implementation:** The carrying out of the plan
5. **Follow up:** Meeting again to evaluate the solution

It may sound strange to suggest that various members of the team might be on different steps of the process. However, it is not unusual for team meetings to be conducted in an informal manner with information presented verbally and with little attention paid to focusing on the specific steps of the decision-making process. When this occurs, individual styles of thinking and communicating can lead to one team member seeking very specific and minute details of the problem. At the same time another team member may be thinking of great solutions and still another is wondering how soon the meeting will be over or what to serve for dinner that night. There are several very simple, but effective strategies for improving and formalizing the decision-making process being used by a team when making assistive technology decisions. The AT Planning Guide provides a structure for doing so.

Throughout the Decision Making Process:

Present information in written as well as spoken format where everyone on the team can see it. This requires that the key facts be written on a board, flip chart, overhead projector or butcher paper in large print that is visible to all participants. Some team members may feel that this takes unnecessary effort to write every idea up on a board, but it is an extremely effective way to keep each person focused on which step the team is addressing. As information is shared, it is written on the board or chart visible to all. If one of the team members is distracted by something they have forgotten to do, or is called out

of the meeting for a telephone call, they can quickly "catch up" on what was said when they are able to refocus on the discussion. At the same time, if a group member contributes a solution before the team has finished contributing all the information necessary to identify the problem, the recorder can quickly note the "suggested solution" under **Solution Generation**, and redirect the entire group back to completing **Problem Identification**.

Create a shared group memory. Recording what is being said where it is visible to all adds visual memory to auditory memory and doubles the likelihood that everyone will remember in the same way the information that was discussed. This helps create a shared group memory, one that is very similar across all members of the group. It greatly increases the likelihood of follow through from team members.

Share roles and responsibilities. Team members may be hesitant to take a leadership role in conducting team meetings. Rotating roles from one meeting to the next is an effective way to share this responsibility. At each meeting one team member can serve as **facilitator**, while another is **recorder**, and still another acts as **timekeeper** to keep the group moving through the discussion. It is important that the team move at a pace that will allow the most time at the most important discussion points and keep the team from getting side tracked or bogged down (Fox & Williams, 1991). In addition, this rotation of roles helps insure that each team member recognizes and respects the contribution each of these participants makes to effective decision-making.

During Problem Identification:

Address not only the characteristics of the student, but also of the environments in which the student functions, and the tasks that need to be done. Many times when technology is abandoned, it is because only the physical, psychological, and social characteristics of the student are addressed, with little or no attention paid to the settings in which the device will be used or the specific tasks that the student really needs to address (Cook & Hussey, 1995). The SETT framework (Zabala, 1994) helps team members to focus on the **student** (their personal characteristics and interests), the **environment** (including physical characteristics of the setting as well as instructional activities and arrangements), and the **task** (which are the specific activities that the target student needs to be able to do in each environment). This focus is helpful in clearly identifying and defining the problem so that the team has a clear focus to guide them as they generate appropriate alternatives and solutions.

During Solution Generation:

When generating solutions, use brainstorming rules to create a climate of trust. An important factor in generating a variety of useful alternatives during Solution Generation is to create a climate of trust by following brainstorming rules. This means that all suggestions are written on the board or chart, no comments are allowed and no judgments are passed. The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible. As the flow of ideas slows, it is a good idea to persevere a little longer. Often the second wave of ideas is the most innovative. If everyone is feeling sluggish and suggestions are few, energy may be increased by putting a two-minute time limit in place to get things started. This short time limit combined with writing everything where it can be seen increases the creativity and allows the group to explore as many options as possible. Additional time can be added if the group agrees, but the short time period helps bring that creative, right side of the brain into action.

If the solutions generated by the team do not include assistive technology, or include only a very few items, the team may need to utilize additional resources. Additional resources can provide an overview of the types of assistive technology solutions that would be appropriate for the student and task for which they are problem solving. Resources may include a person, as mentioned earlier or print, digital, or online resources. In the next section **Using the AT Checklist and other Resources**; several resources that might be helpful are discussed.

During Solution Selection:

During Solution Selection, encourage combining, sequencing and prioritizing. As alternatives are discussed and evaluated, it may become apparent that some items are the same thing in different words or that others make an excellent sequence of steps. New suggestions may be added at any time. This is the place for the team to really discuss the value and relationship of the many suggestions. As individual suggestions are discussed, it is often helpful to group them into "Things we can do tomorrow," "Things we can do in a month," and "Things we may want to consider later." The Action Plan is then created to include a timeline and persons responsible for each of the solutions or steps that were selected.

Obtain consensus from all participants before adjourning meeting. When several people work together to reach a decision, there will be many different ideas presented. In ideal situations, the Solution Selection will result in a unanimous agreement about what specific suggestions should be selected for the action plan. However, life is far from ideal. When unanimous agreement is not reached, it is critical that the team arrive at consensus about the action plan that will be implemented. In order to assure consensus, the facilitator must poll individual team members, asking them if they will support this plan even though they may have personally preferred another solution. When the facilitator fails to poll members for consensus, they may believe they have unanimous agreement, but actually have **majority rule** (a few team members dominating the discussion, while others strongly disagree, but do not speak up), **minority rule** (one team member dominating the discussion, while others disagree and do not speak up), or **authority rule** (no one questioning what the administrator suggested, even though they disagree). When one of these occurs, the chances of successful implementation are decreased.

During Implementation:

When implementation takes place, follow the plan completely. For that to happen, everyone on the team needs to be aware of the plan and his/her role in it (Prentice & Spencer, 1985). Unfortunately this does not always happen if teams do not utilize the strategy of writing down important information during each step of the process. Without that "group memory" important details and key responsibilities are easily forgotten or overlooked while meeting the myriad demands of work in school districts. Implementation is the step of the decision making process that tells us whether the solutions we selected are good ones.

One planning tool we have found useful is Joy Zabala's *The SETT Framework Part II A* and *Part II B*. This is a guide that allows a team to compare the potential effectiveness of selected tools using the same criteria.

THE SETT FRAMEWORK - PART II - A
Developing a Descriptor of an Assistive Technology Tool System and
Brainstorming Tools that May Address Identified Student Needs

STUDENT: _____ AREA OF ESTABLISHED NEED (See SETT: Part I): _____

Enter one important descriptor or function in each column Enter one possible tool in each row							

List one tool on each line.

Name one observable skill that you would see in each square if the tool was supportive during the task. Ex., increase in complex sentences, less spelling errors, longer written assignments, more novel thoughts expressed.

Use a numerical system to match the tasks the team wants supported by the technology to the technology that has most of those features. SETT IIB is the place to document the selected tools and how they can be obtained, as well as the training required to utilize them. It must be remembered that for a tool to be integrated, it must first be learned and integrated into the student's curriculum.

For example, use 1 = not effective to 5 = very effective. The team can decide on how many numbers to use and must define what they represent. At the end of the trial period, all rows are added to determine which tool was most effective.

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SETT SCAFFOLD for TOOLS SELECTION- Part II A
Develop Descriptors of an Assistive Technology Tool System that Addresses Needs and Identify Possible Tools

STUDENT: _____ **AREA OF ESTABLISHED NEED (See SETT: Part I):** _____

STEP 1: Based on S-E-T data, enter descriptors or functions needed by the student across the shaded top row - 1 descriptor per column **STEP 2: Enter promising tools in the shaded left column - 1 tool per row** **STEP 3: For each tool, note matches with descriptors and functions to help guide discussion of devices and services** **USE ADDITIONAL SHEETS IF NECESSARY**								
Descriptors ⇨ **Tools**　⇩								

SETT SCAFFOLD for TOOLS SELECTION-PART II B
Establishing Availability and Training Needs for Promising Tools

SHORT LIST OF TOOLS	TOOL AVAILABILITY			SERVICES (training, planning, coordination, etc) REQUIRED FOR EFFECTIVE USE		
JUSTIFY CHOICES WITH SETT DATA AND DESCRIPTOR MATCH	**S**	**P**	**A**	**STUDENT**	**STAFF**	**FAMILY**

KEY: **S= Systemically available tools - Currently available to ALL students served by this system**
P= Programmatically available through special education services or other services for which identified student is qualified
A= Additional tools that need to be acquired for this student.

For Follow up:

Follow up on a planned schedule. At a set interval after implementation, follow-up or monitoring must take place. This is another area where school teams frequently fail. The school year can slip quickly by while one team member waits on another to do something; or bad weather, illnesses, and absenteeism take their toll. If monitoring does not take place according to the original plan, a variety of problems can crop up and be overlooked as each team member focuses on their own assignment, but does not have the opportunity to get the "big picture" that comes from a team discussion.

Using the AT Decision Making Guide will guide the team through the steps of the process. Following these simple, but effective steps can be extremely useful to teams in the schools as they strive to make appropriate and effective assistive technology decisions for the students they serve.

WATI Assistive Technology Decision Making Guide

Area of Concern _____

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION-(SAMPLE)

Student's Abilities/Difficulties	Environmental Considerations	Tasks
• Writing/use of hands • Communication • Reading/academics • Mobility • Vision • Hearing • Behavior • Other	• Classroom • Playground • Lunch room • Home, etc. In each: • Technology equipment available • Room arrangement, lighting • Sound • Activities, etc	• Produce legible written material • Produce audible speech • Read text • Complete math problems • Participate in recreation/leisure • Move independently in the school environment
Sensory Considerations		**Narrowing the Focus**
Vision/Hearing/Tactile (hyper/hypo)		i.e. Specific task identified for solution generation
Solution Generation Tools & Strategies	**Solution Selection Tools & Strategies**	**Implementation Plan**
Brainstorming Only No Decision Review Checklist	Discuss & Select Idea from Solution Generation	AT Trials/Services Needed: Date Length Person Responsible
		Follow-Up Plan
		Who & When Set specific date now.

Important: It is intended that you use this as a guide. Each topic should be written in large print where everyone can see them, i.e. on a flip chart or board. Information should then be transferred to paper for distribution, file, and future reference.