MARIKO HORIGOME

Digital Literacy Training Advances Opportunities for Japan's Physically Disabled Population

Certification validating digital skills boosts confidence and skills of individuals with disabilities as they prepare for workplace success

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Mariko Horigome, a social welfare counselor with Tokyo Colony, believes Certiport Internet Computing Core Certification (IC³®) and other ICT certifications can bring about profound benefits and confidence to all people, including those with physical disabilities. Her organization's efforts to promote digital literacy have helped bridge the Digital Divide among the disabled population of her native Japan.

Tokyo Colony, established in 1951, provides equal opportunities in social participation for disabled individuals through vocational training, skill development and employment services. The Information Technology Center for Persons with Disabilities, one of Tokyo Colony's many projects commissioned by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, was established in 2004 to promote digital literacy as a way to boost disabled individuals' opportunities to enter the workforce and more fully participate in society.

Digital literacy skills are essential for communication and are the first step toward social participation for disabled individuals, said Horigome. She feels the opportunity to access technology tools is something all individuals are entitled to. Even those with physical limitations can develop IT skills, especially with the right training, equipment and support, she said.

"Despite the severity of their disabilities, with appropriate aid devices disabled individuals can send e-mails even [while] lying in bed, with one finger or with eye movements," said Horigome. "If you cannot see, you can use audio software to read aloud what is written. If you cannot hear, the vibration mode of cellular phone can tell you that you have a text message."

The Center works hard to provide disabled users with training and tools that specifically address their needs and difficulties. Recently, Certiport IC³ was introduced as an enhancement to the program, due in large part to its versatility for practical skill development. Students at the IT Center want to acquire useful skills in an efficient way, said Horigome. IC³ provides students with practical skills they can immediately implement throughout their daily lives.

"I think the acquisition of IC³ and other distinguished certifications validates the capabilities of people and changes their way of working," said Horigome.

For individuals with physical disabilities this has a profound impact on their lives.

"We have seen more than 60 cases where seriously disabled individuals are working at home after completing our training," she said. One man who went through the training for certification now works from home for a broadcasting company. Despite a hearing disability and severe muscular illness, he is able to successfully work and make a contribution to the company by his efforts.

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To make the process of certification and skill development more accessible to disabled individuals the IT Center and Tokyo Colony offer a variety of training programs that cater to the learning styles and physical abilities of the students, said Horigome. Distance learning courses and at-home instruction are also available to students unable to come to the Center.

In addition to coursework, the IT Center also provides its disabled students with specialized devices, such as customized hardware, software and communication equipment that support comfortable computer usage. The staff of Tokyo Colony facilitates opportunities for disabled students to take certification exams at testing centers and makes sure they have the proper software and equipment to do so, depending on the severity of their disabilities. Upon achievement of credentials, the IT Center continues to provide support to disabled individuals as they work.

The IT Center now has as many as 50 volunteers available to assist staff members in the effort to promote the digital literacy, so those with disabilities can more fully participate in society. The number of disabled individuals receiving certifications continues to grow every year, and the training and certifications are building confidence and changing lives.

"I have encountered some people who have a serious disability due to sickness or accident and have to depend on other people's support for most of their daily lives," said Horigome. "But I have seen that even such people can enrich their lives and enter the workforce by use of personal computers and networks. It lets them lead a new life."

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