Overview of EmployAble Project

EmployAble is a model Virtual Employment Orientation and Support Center funded by the Kessler Foundation and developed by the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawai‘i in partnership with Virtual Ability and Abilicorp.

EmployAble is guided by a belief that a practical and sustainable employment tool can be created through a combination of technological innovation and collaboration with employers, representatives of the disability community, and people with disabilities. Using interactive online tools including the virtual environment Second Life as a platform, EmployAble facilitates employment skills training, networking, mentoring, and employment resources for persons with disabilities.

In the Summer and Fall of 2013, a pilot study was conducted to assess the use of the EmployAble model by 51 adults with disabilities from across the United States. Results indicate that the Employable model holds promise for improving the employment status of people with disabilities.

Description of Technology Used for EmployAble

Online technologies used for EmployAble focused on four critical areas of engagement: 1. Self paced interactive web-based instructional module, 2. Live chat video conferencing with other participants and mentors, 3. Multi user virtual environment (MUVE) for immersive training practice and assessment, 4. Social media applications used for achieving outcomes based on the curriculum.
Online Module
The content material and curriculum for the first phase of the EmployAble project targeted preparation for a job interview. We assembled a web-based learning module using a Content Management System (CMS) that fit the requirements for accessibility based on the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) priorities. We also designed the module so that it could be used with assistive technology, was output device independent, and could be used with low internet bandwidth, smart phones, tablets, and older computer configurations.

Live Conferencing
We chose an interactive live video chat platform based on participant familiarity, ease of use, and multimodal communication such as simultaneous text, video, and audio. Skype video chat was selected as the vast majority of participants already had an account and could access the EmployAble project’s premium account that fulfilled accessibility requirements. The Skype program could be used in conjunction with the MUVE program for full inclusion of all participants.

MUVE
We selected Second Life®, a well established and developed multi user virtual environment program for the immersive training. Participants used virtual persona called “avatars” to navigate an online simulated environment that mirrored the real world. Partnering with the premier virtual environment disability-focused organization Virtual Ability Inc., (www.virtualability.org), a virtual simulation site was developed with EmployAble project materials being demonstrated in the three key areas of the project (training, mentoring/employer contacts, and accessibility/accommodation information). We developed a full simulation of a street complete with businesses ready for participants to engage as employees, managers, and observers. Virtual Ability also conducted much of the training for participants and EmployAble staff in how to navigate and interact with Second Life®, including how to address the use of assistive technology.

Social Media
Online social media programs were implemented as part of the EmployAble training in order to reinforce participant use of technology to assist in job placement and retention. Being connected through online social media leveraged the material and curriculum by giving the participants real life interaction with employment networks and online social communities related to their specific employment goals and challenges. The social media programs, Twitter (www.twitter.com), Facebook (www.facebook.com) and LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), were introduced as tools and resources for building and disseminating a resume, connecting with others, and conducting a job search.
Implementing Accessibility Standards

The starting point for addressing online accessibility was Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. The project’s public website, www.cds.hawaii.edu/employable followed the recommendations for accessibility conformance of the World Wide Web Consortium (www.w3c.org/WAI/eval). We also used Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (www.cast.org/udl) to fully complement the learning experience for anyone wanting to use the EmployAble Project. UDL aspects included scaffolding content material, using multimode means of representation through captioned videos along with screen readable text, short end section quizzes with guided answers to reinforce section content material, and automatic formatting for mobile and small screened end user devices.

The Second Life© EmployAble simulation site modeled Universal Design in the design of all buildings and learning centers through ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant doorways, lowered desks and public transaction areas, and use of ramps for avatars to navigate through the area. Simulated wheelchairs were also made available for participants although most chose not to use them.

UDL Principles also guided the overall design of the project. For example content material was reinforced through repetition on the public website, the web-based learning module, Second Life© EmployAble learning centers, and through Twitter postings. Real-Time meetings had video, audio and text features enabled for creating an accessible means by which visually and hearing impaired participants and mentors could interact.

Outcomes

Findings indicate participants experienced increased knowledge and appreciation for the technologies and programs presented during the course of the project with the online learning module and mentoring video chat program being the most popular. A smaller number of participants reported the Second Life© site as being useful but those who did found the experience more beneficial for practicing for job interview then the other technologies. The MUVE experience has a high learning curve but participants who were experienced in computer simulated gaming found the transition relatively easy. Participants who were not experienced but highly motivated to learn the content material in order to achieve employment also expressed a high regard for the MUVE component of the project. Overall the participants found the online experience through the EmployAble Project to be accessible and rated their experience as positive.
Implication for Practice

The EmployAble Pilot Study holds a number of implications for practice in the area of accessibility and online technology used for distance learning. Specifically:

1. Universal Design for Learning principles applied to online curriculum and delivery platforms create an accessible environment for people with disabilities.

2. Multi-modal means of representing material are necessary for Section 508 compliance.

3. Technology training on established accessibility rich programs enhance better outcomes for people with disabilities.

Further Resources and Contact Information

Email: employ@hawaii.edu
EmployAble Website: www.cds.hawaii.edu/employable
Employable Interview Module: https://sites.google.com/a/hawaii.edu/interview-module/

Please feel free to distribute with the following acknowledgement:
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