



◀ Jan Lynch, technology services administrator at the East Texas Lighthouse, was the first train-the-trainer alumnus to teach the ProMOTE curriculum at an NIB associated agency. Here she assists Akosua Asaber, computer and assistive technology instructor from The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.

ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO CAREER SUCCESS

NIB's one-of-a-kind ProMOTE program offers in-depth computer training that levels the playing field, closes skills gaps, and enhances career options for people who are blind.

BY SHARON HERRIGAN

NIB has always been dedicated to creating innovative career opportunities for people who are blind. “It’s our — and our associated agencies’ — core mission,” says Billy Parker, NIB’s program director for employment support services. “So when we realized we were having trouble recruiting people into higher-level positions here at NIB, we had to ask why.”

The analysis revealed one big outlier: candidates’ computer skills. Many assistive technology (AT) users had only a basic level of computer training — enough to complete essential tasks, but not enough to meet the demands of higher-level jobs.

“Once we identified the barrier, we started looking for existing training

to help correct it,” says Parker. “We assumed this level of in-depth training already existed, but it didn’t. So we decided to create it ourselves.”

Designing the Program

“People who are blind can’t just point a mouse, click on the ‘Help’ button, and watch a tutorial,” explains Parker. Working with TCS Associates, now known as TCSA, a Maryland-based firm that provides accessibility and AT services, NIB created the Professional Mastery of Office Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) program to provide advanced computer skills training for AT users.

Originally designed as an immersive 40-hour-per-week, four-week program — a mix of formal classroom

learning and hands-on, time-sensitive projects reflective of the kind of work participants would encounter in the workplace — Parker says ProMOTE is unlike any other training program offered. Since the pilot in 2016, instructors have flexed the curriculum to accommodate part-time and remote instruction.

Participants master the AT they use — either JAWS, a screen reading program, or ZoomText, a screen magnification program — and learn more than 100 different keystrokes to perform tasks in Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook without using a mouse. They also learn to conduct advanced Internet research, navigate Windows, and create well-organized accessible documents. At the end of the training, students

showcase their mastery by developing and delivering a final project.

“Once we built the foundation, we tested it in two pilot programs,” explains Parker. The first pilot was held at The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts; the second, at the Olmsted Center for Sight (now VIA) in Buffalo, New York.

The Pilots

The pilots proved the program was workable, Parker says, “but it’s asking a lot for participants to be away from home for that length of time.” Nonetheless, Aaron Simoneau, a contract administrator at NIB who participated in the first pilot, says it was time well spent.

Simoneau, an associate contract administrator at NIB when Parker asked him to participate in the pilot, became legally blind in 2003, after he had completed college. “I had two unpaid internships, but they didn’t lead to any job offers,” recalls Simoneau. He was unemployed in his native Massachusetts for eight years before learning about NIB’s contract management support training program. After completing the training, Simoneau was hired by NIB in 2011 and was just about to move from

ZoomText to JAWS when the ProMOTE opportunity came up. The timing couldn’t have been better.

Because he was just starting out with JAWS, Simoneau often found ProMOTE exhausting. But it was also invaluable. “I learned so much through the experience, and that positioned me to be a lot more efficient and confident at my job,” says Simoneau, who was promoted to his current position shortly after completing the program. “I feel very fortunate that NIB supported me through the training.”

Nichelle Morris recently relocated from Minnesota, where she was a contract specialist for the Department of Veterans Affairs, to the Washington, D.C., area to work for another federal agency. She credits the ProMOTE pilot in New York with keeping her career moving forward. “I couldn’t have gotten to where I am today without ProMOTE,” she says. “It was an answer to my prayers.

Before ProMOTE Morris, who has Stargardt Disease, a degenerative eye condition, had hired an editor to review her work — an expensive proposition. “I couldn’t proofread my writing anymore and my work was sloppy — a misplaced

comma here, a period there,” she recalls. In ProMOTE she learned to use keystrokes instead of a mouse and how to more effectively use ZoomText.

The experience, she says, also helped build her confidence. “Because of ProMOTE, I know I can accomplish everything I need to do,” says Morris. “If I ran a school for people who are blind, it would be a class everyone would be required to take to graduate.”

Replicating Success

With the success of the pilots, NIB wanted to get the program into as many hands as possible. In March 2017, a ProMOTE train-the-trainer program, hosted at NIB headquarters, taught training staff from NIB associated nonprofit agencies how to deliver the curriculum at their agencies. Today two agencies — East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in Tyler, Texas, and Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services (BVRS) of Pittsburgh — have provided multiple sessions of the program.

Jan Lynch, technology services administrator at the East Texas Lighthouse, was the first train-the-trainer alumnus to teach the ProMOTE curriculum at an NIB associated agency. Lighthouse Client



▲ ProMOTE students (left to right) Akosua Asaber, from The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.; Katy Ng, from NewView Oklahoma; Cindy Van Winkle, also from The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.; and Allie Parrish, of East Texas Lighthouse.



▲ Sarah Lucas, an accounting clerk at Blind and Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh, participated in the agency’s modified schedule program. She says the format helped solidify new skills by allowing her to put them into practice right away.

FEATURE STORY

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Services Manager Amy Anderson calls Lynch “the ProMOTE program superstar.”

But Lynch credits great teamwork for the successful launch of the agency’s pilot program, which had three participants and followed NIB’s four-week residential model. After receiving positive feedback, the Lighthouse held another class with four participants. “The feedback about the program and the quality of delivery was still good, but students said four weeks away from home was a big hurdle,” says Lynch.

Lynch and her IT department brainstormed solutions, deciding to use the web conferencing app Zoom to deliver some of the curriculum remotely. “The people at Zoom spent a lot of time listening to us and helped us design a classroom in the app,” says Lynch, who first held a one-week Excel pilot via Zoom. “By the end of the second day, I knew it was going to work.”

Given that success, the Lighthouse adapted the program to offer two weeks of virtual instruction using Zoom and two weeks of residential instruction. Initially concerned that the approach might hinder formation of the tight bonds students in the four-week residential program had, Lynch says her worries were unfounded. When she met the students at the hotel for the last two weeks of residential training, she knew instantly that the bonds were already there, developed during their two weeks of working together online. With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, Lynch has been at work designing an online-only ProMOTE session to be held in August.

Lynch hasn’t stopped there. The train-the-trainer program identified a skills gap among associated agency assistive technology trainers who themselves lacked the skills necessary to teach the ProMOTE program. In response, Lynch and her team developed the Assistive Technology Instructor Program to provide instruction on JAWS and ZoomText, and best practices for teaching the programs. The first program was piloted last summer.



▲ Assistive technology instructor Art Rizzino (left) with ProMOTE student Diane Faust, who left her job in the insurance industry due to vision loss. After completing ProMOTE, Faust joined BVRS as a rehabilitation instructor.

Anderson says the ProMOTE program has been a game changer. “It’s a huge benefit. Anytime I hire someone in administration, I require them to go through the program,” she says, noting students have earned job promotions after completion.

ProMOTE certainly made a difference for Jill Thurmond, who completed the Lighthouse pilot in 2018. A microbiologist forced into retirement due to retinitis pigmentosa, Thurmond was out of the workforce for nine years when she went to the Beacon Lighthouse in Wichita Falls, Texas, to learn how to live more independently. Soon hired to work at the AbilityOne Base Supply Center® (BSC) Beacon Lighthouse operates at Sheppard Air Force Base just outside of Wichita Falls, she was excited to apply for the ProMOTE program.

“It was such an empowering experience,” says Thurmond, who learned both JAWS and ZoomText during the program. “My vision loss was so gradual that I never learned either program.”

It wasn’t just what she learned that changed her life, Thurmond says, it was the relationships she made. “Jan is such a wonderful, patient teacher

and I also had wonderful classmates. We were a class of three, and my two other classmates took me under their wings and really helped me learn the technology. We still keep in touch.” When Thurmond returned to Wichita Falls, she wanted to share what she had learned. “I went into the medical field to help people and I really missed that. When I returned, I wanted to help people by teaching them what I learned through the program.” Today, Thurmond spends several afternoons a week teaching interested co-workers who are blind basic computer skills; she hopes to expand the classes to veterans and seniors in the local community.

As an IT guy who keeps technology running, Cesar Lopez, from Horizon Industries in Tyler, Texas, thought he was fairly adept when he entered the ProMOTE program — he wanted to participate so he could help his co-workers who use AT. “I actually learned a lot of commands that I didn’t know,” says Lopez, who is legally blind. “I learned a lot more about ZoomText and I use it more now thanks to the program.”

For Lopez, ProMOTE has made his work more rewarding. “I’ve been able to help others here, particularly our JAWS users. They can only get what JAWS reads to them. Now, I can show them how to do something a little differently that they

had no way of knowing before,” he says. “ProMOTE gave me perspective on ways to do things that’s made me much more efficient in my work, and that I’ve been able to pass along to others.”

Flexing the Curriculum

After successfully completing the train-the-trainer program, two AT instructors — Tracey Morsek and Art Rizzino — from Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh returned to the agency and started raising money to provide scholarships for students to attend their first four-week residential session. Four students were in that class, recalls Leslie Montgomery, vice president of external affairs for the agency. Of the four, one was hired by BVRs and one works in the private sector.

As in Texas, the four-week on-site requirement proved challenging. When the time came to design a second session for internal employees, BVRs looked for ways that participants would be able to continue in their regular jobs during training. The result was a schedule of classes held Monday through Wednesday for six weeks, giving students a chance to work two days a week and apply what they were learning in class.

The program had a great impact at the agency, says Montgomery. “It increases students’ efficiency, confidence, and skills.”

JAWS user Diane Faust couldn’t agree more. A student in the first class, Faust, was an insurance company business manager before leaving her position due to vision loss. When she learned about the ProMOTE program, she felt the timing was perfect. After she completed the program, BVRs hired Faust as a rehabilitation instructor.


In her role at the agency, Faust not only teaches others how to live independently, she spends a lot of time on the computer, creating schedules, entering information into databases, and writing reports. The ProMOTE program, she says, taught her keyboard shortcuts that make her much more efficient and give her confidence in troubleshooting technical issues both at the office and with her home computer.

Sarah Lucas, an accounting clerk at BVRs, went through the second ProMOTE program and agrees with Faust that it really boosted her confidence and efficiency. She says the three-day-a-week format helped solidify her new skills.

“I was learning stuff Monday through Wednesday that I could immediately use on the job Thursday and Friday,” she recalls. “Learning all the keystrokes has really made me faster and more efficient. Who needs a mouse?”


“It’s also a wonderful program for folks who haven’t worked in a while,” says Faust. “When you lose your vision as an adult, you can sometimes reach a panic point. This program really gives you confidence and allows you to feel as though you can re-enter the workforce.”

Erika Petach, president of the agency, agrees. “We are very proud of the success our participants have achieved as a result of their experience with the ProMOTE program,” she says. “We have seen first-hand the impact this program can have on their lives.” BVRs is currently raising money to offer a training session for AT users who are blind living in the local community.


Like many program participants, Lucas agrees that ProMOTE does more than give people job skills. “It gives people hope,” she says. 

Sharon Horrigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.



 Cindy Van Winkle, a development and community outreach coordinator for The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., was one of four students who completed two weeks of distance learning before coming to the East Texas Lighthouse.



 April 2019 ProMOTE graduates (left to right), computer and assistive technology instructor Akosua Asaber, education services administrator Allie Parrish, development and community outreach coordinator Cindy Van Winkle, and production employee Katy Ng.