

Using the internet when you can't use a computer



The internet is an important part of managing daily life, but people with some disabilities are left behind, including those with electromagnetic hypersensitivity. We discuss how to access the internet through a helper who is a volunteer, or someone you hire.

Keywords: computer, internet, disability, access, EHS, electrical hypersensitivity

The forced digitalization

The world has moved to electronic communication and it has become much harder for those of us who cannot use a computer. Businesses and government offices make it more and more difficult to contact them in any other way. If they have a call center, the wait is often long. If you send them a letter it often gets ignored, and some businesses no longer even publish their mailing address to discourage letters.

Printed catalogs used to clog mailboxes, now they are rare. Most “mail order” companies have stopped printing catalogs.

The 2020 U.S. Census was the first to allow online registrations. This writer twice tried to get the paper form and never got any (a helper then did it online.)

The United States tax office, the Internal Revenue Service, made it increasingly difficult to get tax forms on paper. They were mailed out later and later each year. They arrived *after* the filing deadline in 2023. Some Nordic countries have not accepted tax filings on paper for several years.

Some businesses simply refer a caller to their website. When explaining that is not possible, sometimes you get snide remarks like “learn to use a computer” or “use a computer at the library.” I’ve told them I have a Master’s degree in engineering, so I know very well how to use a computer. The problem is a disability, not lack of skills. But rarely do they comprehend what I say and further explanation is never helpful.

Then there are friends and family. Some find it just too inconvenient to print out the latest family photos they posted on Facebook and then stuff the sheets in an envelope, get a stamp and dump it in a mailbox. It really is faster to do it all online.

Who can’t use a computer?

There can be many reasons a person cannot use a computer. It used to be mostly older people who had never learned it, but home computers have now been common for a generation so nearly everyone is now comfortable using them.

There are people who have disabilities that make computers hard or impossible to use. People who are blind or have poor vision so they can’t see the screen. People whose hands are not able to operate the mouse or keyboard. There are various ways to help, but it is still difficult for them to use a computer.

Then there are the people with environmental disabilities who don’t tolerate the computer itself. It can be the chemical fumes, the screen flicker, the bluish light or the electromagnetic radiation. There are also here ways to lessen the problems, but still there are people who really can’t use a computer, or just very briefly. This writer is one of them.

Using a human helper or assistant

A way to cope is to let someone else use the computer to search for information, order things online, communicate by e-mail, register on a website and the many other functions routinely done by people without these disabilities.

In some cases it works best if you are in the same room, so the assistant can ask you what information to enter. This is especially useful for more interactive websites where the data they ask for comes up as you go.

More commonly, the assistant can find the information you need and then give it to you on paper (more on this later).

I write down on paper each question to be researched on the web or the text of each e-mail to be sent.

I number each little task and my assistants produce a simple one-page report with comments, such as “Didn’t find anything,” a list of what the items ordered cost, or ask for clarification.

Even related tasks are numbered separately. Otherwise it happens that some subtasks get overlooked.

I’ve found that ten small tasks is a good number. More than that and the person’s focus will wander.

To reply to an e-mail, I write my reply on the printout of the e-mail, so it is easy for the assistant to find the original e-mail and then click on REPLY.

Printing

The assistant may have a printer to generate the printouts. The paper can then be mailed to you, or brought in person.

If the assistant is not local, or the amount of paper is large, the printouts could be made at a local copy shop. They may be able to do volume printing cheaper than a home-office printer.

I have an agreement with a local copy shop. Each week or two they open my e-mail account and print all the e-mails and attached files. Then a helper picks up the stack. This works very well for my need, which is often above a hundred pages a week.

The e-mail address is only known by a few people. Otherwise I'd soon be paying for a lot of spam mails.

The copy shop folks simply print every e-mail. It would take too much of their time to actually look at each e-mail to determine whether it is spam or not – and sometimes they would not be able to tell the difference anyway.



Employee of a photocopy shop who regularly prints out e-mails for their disabled customers.

They also print out the screen listing the emails. They use it to tally up how many pages they've printed. I use it to see if they missed some (it happens).

Some copy shops accept files sent to them by e-mail if you come and pick the prints up the same day. Some can also accept files on a USB flash drive. Some photo copiers even have slots for flash drives (files must be in common formats, such as PDF).

If they do color copying, ask them to print black-and-white only to save you money.

I get sick from the ink fumes, so I have to offgas the printouts, or put them inside sheet protectors. To make that easier the copy shop always print double-sided for me.

Printing problems

Unfortunately, many web pages are not really printable. This is due to poor web design that does not consider that anyone might want a hard copy.

Some pages are completely unreadable on a printout. These often include spurious sections of HTML code mixed with snippets of text here and there.

Some sites use pictures that are too detailed, so they are slow to load. They may not fully load before the person clicks on PRINT, so the pictures will be missing on the printout.

Some web page are designed to be very wide, so the right side is cut off on a printout.

Then there is the truly annoying habit some websites have, where a pop-up bar hovers at the top of the window as the reader scrolls down a page. On printouts, such a bar covers the top of each sheet and blocks three or four lines.

Fortunately, some websites offer “printer friendly” versions of their pages, or PDF versions. But the assistant often does not notice such a detail – then a new search request must be made, specifying the printer-friendly version.

Using a dummy e-mail account

Some websites require you to enter an e-mail address. This may be for verification or prevention of robots misusing the site. Many times they simply want to misuse the information for their marketing.

Regardless of the reason, I make sure to instruct the assistant to NEVER hand out the e-mail address used for printing.

Too many companies just love to send out spam about how wonderful they are. And I have to pay for the printing, as the copy shop is not likely to notice it is spam.

Some spammers do have “unsubscribe” links in their e-mails, but sometimes they do not work. Marking the sender as a spammer may not help either, as some keep switching their e-mail account used for spamming.

I’ve once called a company who promised to send the information I needed by e-mail. They were insistent that they would never misuse my address for spamming, and was even indignant that I thought they would do such a thing. And yet, they

sent me several unwanted “newsletters.” Perhaps the employee didn’t know the truth about her own company.

Communicating by e-mail

Sometimes it is necessary to communicate by e-mail. With this kind of setup, e-mail is very slow. It can easily take two weeks from someone sends me an e-mail and until they receive my reply (unless expedited). This may not be a problem if I just need to send someone a question and they just answer.

For more ongoing correspondence any outsider will wonder why it takes me so long to reply.

Few people are willing to correspond by letter these days. Even if it on their end just includes printing out their “e-mail” reply and putting it in an envelope. People just don’t want to do it.

An alternative I’ve used a lot is to do the initial exchange fully by e-mail, and then go with a hybrid. They send me e-mails that are printed out here. I then write back by letter mail. Perhaps including their original e-mail on paper, so they can see what I am responding to. It is basically e-mail-by-letter, and not like formal letters. It works amazingly well. Some people marvel they have not received a letter in years.

Scanmail

In some cases I use “scanmail,” which is when I write the letter on paper that is then scanned to a PDF file and sent by e-mail. Some fancy copy machines do this directly, where you just press a button, enter the e-mail address on the screen, put the papers in the tray and press the “start” button.

The downside of this system is that some people won’t click on an attached PDF file that arrives without explanation, especially if the return address is a copy shop.

Scanmail is especially useful when sending to multiple people, and I get to keep the original letter without needing to get it copied. It also saves money for postage, especially when going overseas.

Ordering things online

If you live in an area with few stores, or going to the store is difficult, you may need to order regular goods online. Or you may need specialty items.

If you trust the assistant enough, you can give her your credit card information and let her order in your name. A credit card is better than a debit card, as you have more legal rights to dispute a transaction. This includes if the assistant misuses your trust.

Nobody is as interested in avoiding screw-ups as you. It pays to provide as detailed and unambiguous a shopping list as possible. I write out each item to buy separately, and sometimes include a sample label if I have one. That lessens the chances that a similar-looking item is ordered instead.

To lessen the chance of expensive mistakes I write a MAX price for items I'm not sure the price of. Sometimes there are gotchas out there. A friend once asked his assistant to order an old book. He had not specified a price limit and the book turned out to be rare, so he received a museum copy at the cost of a hundred dollars.

Sometimes there are "dynamic pricing" where the price goes up if the website thinks you might pay more. I recently saw that with a book I just read and wanted to order a second copy for a friend. The vendor's website obviously noted I wanted to order the same book and the price jumped from \$18 to \$30.

Sometimes I write "DO NOT BUY" for an item. Then I instead get a printout of the sales page so I can check it. In the next batch I then include the printout to make sure the assistant orders the correct item.

Screwups can still happen. I once had my assistant order a case of cereal boxes of a kind ordered several times before. But this time they arrived by airmail from Europe at an exorbitant cost. Apparently they had stopped selling them in America and the assistant didn't pay enough attention to notice the high price.

Avoid small vendors

There are a lot of small vendors with really poor customer service when there is a problem, such as billing errors or faulty goods. Bigger companies tend to be better.

You might instruct the assistant to favor reputable companies, even if the price isn't as good. But a lot of one-person companies can disguise themselves on trading platforms such as Amazon.

Handling the credit card

The assistant lists in the report what the price was for each purchase. I then go over the monthly statement from the credit card company.

Billing errors do happen. I let trivial amounts fly, but recently I had a small vendor who billed twice, and it wasn't a trivial amount. The assistant handled almost all the hassling, except when the credit card company had to get involved.

Who to hire as your assistant

It is not a job for everyone. It takes a modest amount of computer skills, it takes some common sense and intelligence, it takes focus and also the right type of temperament. Honesty is important too when billing by the hour, and especially if ordering things with your credit card.

The computer skills are the easy part, though some are not able to generate PDF files of what they see on the screen, so it can be sent to a copy shop.

It is a real skill to do good internet searches. The assistant must be able to understand the question and perhaps do multiple searches using different keywords that cover the same issue. And be savvy enough to evaluate the sources offering information – my assistants know to never send me materials from social media or highly politicized websites, or any conspiracy type stuff. (A surprising number of people do not have good discernment of their sources.)

You'd also want someone who will focus on what you are asking for and resist the numerous temptations to go elsewhere and waste time you are paying for.

This brings us to the temperament. You'd want someone you can trust to send e-mails in your name. To type things for you without insisting on editing so it might not say what you intend it to say. You need someone who can set their ego aside. Some people cannot do this.

I have hired about a dozen people over the years. Some I had to let go very fast, the rest stayed on for many years (one stayed on until the week she died of cancer).

I have mostly hired people with disabilities. This is on principle, as they have few options for making a little extra money. They may really like such small jobs that typically take an hour, so it doesn't exhaust them. People who are healthy and have regular jobs seem to be too busy to get around to a small job that doesn't make a real difference to their income.

Disabled people seem to have more "down days," which includes myself. I sometimes have weeks where little gets done. So I am willing to be more flexible than a commercial outfit would.

I've had especially good luck hiring people who used to be secretaries. They seem to have the right skills and attitude.

Hiring someone in another country may not work as well for this, as it requires language skills and cultural understanding. Also, vendor websites often know which country they are accessed from and that can cause all sorts of problems. It also takes longer and costs more to send instruction sheets overseas. (I've worked with multiple people living abroad. Foreign assistants can be suited for more skilled work, such as website management and very technical web searches.)

Finding good help is difficult. I've had the best luck through personal connections and by advertising in newsletters catering to people with disabilities.

How older business managers coped in the early years of the computer revolution.

Desktop computers became common in offices in the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s e-mail really took off as the internet opened up to businesses.

Quite a number of higher-ranking managers were not comfortable using this new thing, and were reluctant to learn. They coped by having their secretary manage their e-mails. If an e-mail needed the personal attention of the big boss, the secretary printed it out on paper. The boss then scribbled a reply on the paper which the secretary then entered into the computer.

Back in the 1990s, many businesses were not even able to respond to an e-mail. If they had an e-mail address they might not reply, or the junior person who replied could only offer platitudes. The people who could give a real answer did not use e-mail.

This may seem hard to believe today, but back then it took several years for e-mail to be incorporated into businesses. Social media did not yet exist except among computer people (USENET and listservs).

About the author

The author has a Master's degree in engineering and started using computers in 1976. His first e-mail was sent in 1985.

He is now the volunteer editor of the website eiwellspring.org, which is managed almost entirely on paper. The operation involves a handful of people in different locations.

Communication between the people is on paper sent through postal mail or scanned into e-mails. A copy shop prints out any incoming e-mails.

This is a very slow process. It is much too slow, cumbersome and expensive for a commercial operation. But since most of us are disabled, with a much reduced work capacity, it fits well.

I know a man who was able to operate his small business for about five years in the same way. He hired a part time secretary, and occasionally got computer help from his neighbor when an urgent e-mail needed to be sent. He eventually sold the business.

I like to say that what a regular person can accomplish on a computer in one hour takes us two weeks. People who do not have this disability simply cannot fully comprehend this.

More information

More articles about coping with electrical hypersensitivity are available on www.eiwellspring.org.

For a description of how I manage the website, go to www.eiwellspring.org/aboutthissite.html.

2022 (updated 2024)