

My Life Plan

Interactive CD-ROM

Les Cowan, Andy Bradley, and Kirsty Murray and Published by: Information PLUS 2006: Available from: Pavilion Publishing (Brighton) Ltd £195 +VAT

Reviewed by Richard Brattan: Information Manager HILT

The My Life Plan package is a CD-rom using graphics, symbols, audio and text. It is a carefully considered and inclusive resource that support staff could work on with a person to build up a comprehensive picture of their life. There are 19 sections that can all help in building a person-centred plan. It can be added to and edited as time goes by. For this review I've looked at different elements of the whole package.

Interface and navigation

There's a definite educational/community feel about the initial interface and opening section, which is cleverly considered but, for me, lacked any kind of contemporary buzz. It opens with the image of a town. Audio commentary asks you to click on a building to add information. For example, clicking on the museum enables you to add pictures in a gallery section. I thought this was a great metaphor but something about it reminded me of the Trumpton and Camberwick Green TV shows I watched as a child (yes, I'm quite old). As I work and live in inner London I felt the suburban village depicted may not reflect the environment that the people I know live in and relate to. There was something about the cosiness of it that I found a little simplistic.

As a section opens you can view all the other available sections on tabs across the top. For people with limited reading abilities it may have helped if symbols or audio had been added to these headings. Elsewhere in each section the navigation runs along the bottom of each page using symbols. Text pops up as the mouse rolls over each symbol giving a description of its function. This was very easy to understand and will help people learn the function of each symbol over time.

Sections, text and headings

The sections relate to different aspects of people's lives, to their support and independent living skills. Each section has subheadings and areas where you can enter information and print it off or save it. The section headings are well thought out, person centred, and use inclusive language, for example, 'Things I need help with' and 'Things I can do by myself. The sections are comprehensive, some leading on to subsections and questionnaires. For example, in the 'My Health' section there is an extensive questionnaire looking at different aspects of health. Lots of fields require text to be entered, though, which could lead to people getting bored when support staff are doing it. There are sections with drag and drop options, which are better - using symbols that people themselves can place on the page.

Audio and graphics

The audio isn't overdone and lots of it is fairly comical. Clicking noises happen when buttons are pressed. Removing and returning credit cards to a wallet in the 'My Money' section is accompanied by a humorous rising and falling sound, which made me smile, engaged me and made me want to do it again. But the meanings of audio and graphics are open to interpretation. If people have had limited experience or exposure to products using similar devices, it may take time for them to learn what the different noises or pictures mean. On the whole the graphics are very good. They are good fun and engage you by combining simple animations with audio. A couple of my favourites were the wallet with

the rising and falling credit cards described above and a payslip where you enter details about a person's employment. I also really liked the crystal balls used in the 'Future Plans' section. Clicking on the 'Milestones' crystal balls linked you to an animation showing a road stretching out into the distance with a moving car (accompanied by car horn and driving noise) passing signposts with different time periods written on them such as, 'three months' or 'five years' so service users could describe what they hope to achieve in the future. Brilliant.

Conclusion

Technology has huge potential for enabling and radically altering the lives of people with learning difficulties by giving them greater independence, choice and opportunities to network with others and acquire new skills. Whether this happens depends on organisations having the insight, resources and drive to support people along this road. Society is changing to incorporate ever greater levels of technological use for both leisure and communication. People with learning difficulties have a right to be included in this change. My Life Plan is a step in that direction. It is a useful tool for collating information that will help us get people's support right. It won't be the best way for everyone, but it is an inclusive, fun and easy-to-use package that many will enjoy.