

# **Everything You Need To Know About Getting and Keeping a Job For Young Adults with a Disability**

## **Employment**

Having a job can be exciting, fun, hard work, scary, and full of new skills to learn and master. This is true for all young people with or without disabilities. In the past, many people with disabilities didn't have jobs. This was especially true for people with mental retardation and those with autism. Today, fortunately, the employment prospects for such individuals are changing. Young people with disabilities are learning important skills in school and on the job. These skills are proving useful to employers, and so are the other talents that people with disabilities bring to the workplace.

How do typical young people become employed? Most look in the help wanted ads or find out about job openings from friends or relatives. They may go to an interview, give their resume to the prospective employer, and, if all goes well and they have the skills necessary, they get the job.

Youth with disabilities sometimes follow this path, but more often they need help in finding a job. The amount of help they need will depend on a number of factors, including:

- The job market at the time,
- What type of job they're interested in,
- How much training the job requires,
- How much training they themselves have, and
- What type of disability they have.

## **What Kinds of Jobs Are There?**

What kinds of jobs are out there for these young people? The following section takes a look at the types of employment opportunities available for young men and women. These include: competitive employment, supported employment, and segregated employment.

## **Competitive Employment**

Competitive employment means a full-time or part-time job with competitive wages and responsibilities. Typically, competitive employment means that no long-term support is provided to the employee to help him or her learn the job or continue to perform the job. This lack of ongoing or long-term support is one aspect that distinguishes competitive employment from both supported employment and segregated employment.

All sorts of jobs are considered competitive employment - waiting on tables, cutting grass, fixing cars, and being a teacher, secretary, factory worker, file clerk, or computer programmer. The amount of education or training a person needs will vary depending on the type of job.

## **Supported Employment**

In supported employment, individuals typically work in competitive jobs alongside and with individuals who do not have disabilities. One of the characteristics of supported employment is that the person receives ongoing support services while on the job. This support is often provided by a job coach who helps the person learn to do the job and understands the rules, conventions, and expectations of the job site. The support continues to be provided as long as the person holds the job, although the amount of support may be reduced over time as the person becomes able to do the job more independently.

Supported employment offers the chance to earn wages in jobs where individuals with disabilities work alongside their peers who do not have disabilities.

As the Association for Persons in Supported Employment observes, "Supported employment focuses on a person's abilities and provides the supports the individual needs to be successful on a long-term basis." To maximize the chances for success, it's important that the job and the work environment be a good match to the "known interests, skills, and support needs of the person with a disability" (PACER Center).

**For more information on Supported Employment, try this**

**resource:** [www.worksupport.com/Main/semanual.asp](http://www.worksupport.com/Main/semanual.asp) Worksupport.com provides information, resources, and research on work and disability issues. This includes the manual entitled "Supported Employment: A Customer-Driven Approach for Persons with Significant Disabilities."

**Segregated Employment**

In segregated employment, individuals with disabilities work in a self-contained unit and are not integrated with works without disabilities. This type of employment is generally supported by federal and/or state funds. The type of training that workers receive varies from program to program, as does the type of work they do. Some typical tasks include sewing, packaging, or collating.

In the past, segregated employment was thought to be the only option available for individuals with significant cognitive disabilities such as mental retardation or autism. Now it is clear that individuals with such disabilities can work in community settings when provided with adequate support. Nonetheless, segregated employment continues to be an option for many workers with cognitive disabilities.

**Whose Involved?**

Any number of individuals can be involved in helping the young person find and keep a job. But the most important person to be involved is the young person!

The young man or woman must be at the center of all employment considerations. He or she is the one who is going to be doing the job. Many people may give support, may supervise or provide training to the young person, and may invest their heart and soul in seeing that the young person succeeds, but the bottom line is that *this is the young person's job*.

Given that, it's important to consider what the person is interested in. What is he or she good at? What are his or her support needs? What type of work environment does the person prefer? These questions need to be answered when others are involved in helping the youth find a job that's satisfying or, at the very least, is a learning experience upon which to build future opportunities.

In addition to the student, who is likely to be involved in the student's job search and eventual employment? Depending upon the age of the young person and whether he or she is still in school, some or all of the following individuals may be involved:

- The parents or guardians,
- A transition specialist at the school,
- A job development specialist or a vocational rehabilitation counselor
- Friends or people from the community who know the young person, and eventually
- The employer.

*Parents* (or guardians) have long been particularly effective participants in their sons and daughters'

employment. The kinds of support families often provide are;

- Ideas about the type of work an individual likes and is able to do,
- Suggestions about where to look for a job, and
- Assistance with transportation.

*Transition Specialists* may become involved through the public school system when the student reaches the age where transition planning begins. This specialist helps the student by way of a variety of activities, such as:

- Working with the student to identify preferences and goals;
- Setting up opportunities for the student (or a group of students) to learn about different careers through such activities as watching movies about careers, job shadowing, visiting different job environments, and hands-on activities that allow the student(s) to try out a job or aspects of a job;
- Looking at what skills the student presently has and what skills he or she will need in the adult world;
- Recommending coursework that the student should take throughout the remainder of high school to prepare for adult living (recreation, employment, postsecondary education, independent living);
- Identifying what job supports the student's needs;
- Helping the student assemble a portfolio of job experiences, resumes, work recommendations, and the like; and
- Making connections with the adult service system.

*Rehabilitation counselors* and *job development specialists* can be involved in a student's transition planning while the student is still in school. The *rehabilitation counselor* typically works for the state's vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency, helping people with disabilities prepare for and find employment. For students who are eligible for VR, a wide variety of services are available, including: evaluation of the person's interests, capabilities, and limitations; job training; transportation; aids and devices; job placement; and job follow-up.

A *job development specialist* usually works for the school system or an adult services provider agency such as the vocational rehabilitation agency. As the job title suggests, the chief activity of such a specialist is finding jobs for people with disabilities. Supported employment makes great use of job development specialists. The job development specialist will usually approach an employer to see what positions may be available that match the prospective employer's abilities and preferences. The job developer may offer the employer specific services, including:

- Placing the person on the job;
- Training the employee on job tasks and appropriate workplace behavior (this is usually done by a job coach, who works intensively with the individual);
- Talking with supervisor(s) and coworkers about disability awareness;
- Providing long-term support to the employee on the job; and
- Helping to promote interaction between the employee and his or her co-workers (PACER Center).

The key participant in the employment quest of the person with a disability is, of course, the *employer*. In the past, many businesses and organizations have been reluctant to hire people with disabilities, but in today's marketplace, a great many employers are now discovering the benefits of doing so.

### **Suggestions for the Job Search**

So how *do* young people find a job that matches their interests and skills? This section looks briefly at strategies for searching for a job, including ways that parents and others can support the youth in this very important step in the employment process.

### **Planning for Transition**

When students leave high school, they move into the adult world. For students with disabilities, planning for this transition from school to adult life is a formal process, part of their Individual Education program (IEP). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) *requires* it.

The requirements of IDEA mean that students, parents, and other involved individuals have the opportunity to plan ahead and prepare. Here are some activities that will help students get ready for the world of work that comes during and after high school. Please note that, while the focus of this section is upon preparing for and pursuing employment, there are other, very important areas in transition planning upon which the student may need to focus as well, such as: determining residential options, identifying educational opportunities, and establishing connections within the community.

**Early in high school or even middle school.** With the support and involvement of the student's family and transition team, each student should:

- Learn more about the wide variety of careers that exist;
- Meet with a school counselor to talk about interests and capabilities;
- Take part in vocational assessment activities;
- Identifying training needs and options;
- Pick a few careers of interest; and
- Find out more about those careers.

**While in high school.** High school is an important time in terms of preparing the student for the future. With the support and involvement of the family and transition team, each student should:

- Make sure that the IEP includes transition plans;
- Identify and take high school classes, including vocational programs, that relate to the careers of interest;
- Become involved in early work experiences and those emphasizing work-based learning, such as observing people working in a particular job (called job shadowing), volunteering, trying out a job for several hours or days, having an internship, and having a summer job;
- Learn more about school-to-work programs in the community, which offer opportunities for training and employment through youth apprenticeships, cooperative education, tech-prep, mentorships, independent study, and internships;
- Identify transportation options (i.e., how the young person will get to and from the job) and whether he or she will need travel training in order to use public transportation safely and independently;
- Re-assess interests and capabilities, based on real-world experiences, and re-define goals as necessary;
- Identify gaps in knowledge or skills that need to be addressed;
- Learn the basics of the interview process and practice being interviewed;
- Learn to speak about their disability and to describe accommodations that are necessary or helpful; and
- Contact the vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency and/or the Social Security Administration at age

18 or in the last year of school to determine eligibility for services or benefits.

If the student is eligible for VR services, then he or she will work with the VR counselor to develop what is known as an Individual Plan for Employment, or IPE (formerly known as the Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan, or IWRP).

### **Casting the Job Net Wide**

"Jobs, jobs, jobs." Where is the right one for the young person with a disability? Where is the elusive job matching his or her talents, skills, and interests?

This is a question that young people must answer for themselves. Each young person has to look, experiment, and have many job experiences. The parents, family, transition specialist, job specialist, and others provide support and encouragement, hard work and worry, and often the creative energy needed to connect the youth with the world of work. Sometimes the young person finds a job early on, through his or her early work experiences or personal network of friends and relatives. Other times the net has to be cast wide, or cast again and again, until the job, the employer, and the young person fit one another.

Here are some suggestions for casting the job net, in no particular order of priority. Any one of these suggestions may work. All of them are worth trying. Families, transition specialists, and others involved in helping the student need to:

- Talk to everybody! Neighbors, relatives, coworkers, teachers, clergy, and local businesses all have information on jobs. When you go into a store, look around at what employees are doing there and think about how the young person might fit in or contribute.
- Look within the community. That's where the market is.
- Work with the VR agency in your area to select an adult service provider who will help identify jobs and obtain training for the young person.
- Contact the employment commission within your state. This agency may go by various names, depending on where you live, including: Employment Security, Job Service, or Workforce incentive. This number is usually found under the Government listings in the telephone directory.
- Look in the help wanted section of the newspaper. This may seem incredibly obvious, but you'd be surprised how often it's overlooked as a resource.
- Be direct and go from one employer to another. Fill out an application form and leave it with the employer.
- If the student is studying at a community college or vocational school, take advantage of the job placement office.
- Look in the public library or City Hall. Bulletin boards often list job openings.
- Call your local Independent Living Center (ILC), if you have one. They often have leads on jobs or job clubs for individuals with disabilities.
- Get in touch with local advocacy, support, and disability groups. They may provide help or leads to jobs.
- Use the Internet to look for job listings.
- Remember that volunteering and internships can sometimes lead to paid employment. Certainly, the experience is good to list on a resume.
- Be creative and resourceful. It's possible to convince an employer to create a new job or modify an existing job so that the young person can so apiece of it.

These are just a few ideas for how to approach the challenge of the job search. Jobs are out there, but you've got to look!

## **Resources**

Building and fixing things, math, reading, nature, computers? Helping people, sports, music, or the arts? Visit the Bureau of Labor Statistics for young people and explore career information.

<http://www.bls.gov/k12/>

The ASVAB is a nationally-normed, multi-aptitude test battery used in high schools all over the country. You can use this online program to, in a direct quote from the link above, "Get to know yourself. Think about what you are good at, what you enjoy, what kind of personality you have, and the values you possess. Discover your possibilities and the nature of the jobs that interest you, such as educational requirements, salary, work environment, and future outlook. With so many career possibilities available, how do you choose a career path? Find out more about how to get where you want to go." And hey--info for parents, educators, and counselors, too! <http://www.asvabprogram.com/>

## **Making Accommodations**

As any parent of a child with a disability knows, providing the right support to the individual is very important in helping the person learn and achieve. Some people with disabilities may:

- Learn more slowly than others,
- Need things to be very concrete and hands-on,
- Often have trouble with social skills,
- Like a routine and may have trouble adjusting if the routine is changed,
- Often don't see the consequences of actions they might take, and
- May have trouble solving problems that arise.

These aspects of a disability can, and do, cause problems in the workplace. Because these young adults are entering a new world, and because they come to that new world with special needs, it is very helpful when employers understand the nature of their disability, as well as what types of accommodations can be made. Typical accommodations include:

- Modifying the work schedule (allowing the worker to work fewer hours or take extra breaks, or giving him or her the same shift each day so that he or she can access public transportation);
- Altering how or when a job function is performed;
- Making the workplace accessible (putting in ramps or lowering desks for individuals who use wheelchairs);
- Acquiring or modifying equipment or devices (a telecommunications device for the deaf or a low-vision reader for someone with a visual impairment); and
- Adjusting or modifying pre-employment test formats, training materials, or policies.

Not all of these accommodations will be appropriate to every worker with a disability. It's important to decide which accommodations a person really needs. Employers can receive expert help in identifying and making accommodations for the President's Committee's Job Accommodations Network (JAN). Visit JAN at [www.jan.wvu.edu](http://www.jan.wvu.edu). According to the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, the number one request for reasonable accommodations by persons with disabilities is to have their employer and coworkers educated about their disability.

## **Providing Natural Supports**

Just because individuals with disabilities are at work doesn't mean they are actually included in the culture there. When support services are provided by an agency or individual external to the work site, other workers may get the impression that the employee with the disability is not really part of their workforce and needs some sort of professional assistance to function in their environment. When support can be provided

naturally by *internal* supervisors or coworkers, then the worker with the disability is seen as a coworker who simply needs some level of assistance.

The natural supports that exist in the workplace (and in schools and in the community) can be powerful tools for training and including people with disabilities on the job. Natural supports are the very tools for learning and socializing available to most people when they enter a new job - instruction by a supervisor or mentor, guidance from a worker, friendly exchanges in the lunchroom, feedback from a colleague on job performance.

Using natural supports is becoming an important approach in successful employment for people with significant disabilities. Building upon what exists naturally in the workplace holds promise for long-term job retention. Among other things, those supports are within the workplace and therefore are readily and consistently available to the worker.

### **Resources**

[www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/publicat.htm](http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/publicat.htm) Read the array of publications on this subject at ODEP, the Office of Disability Employment Policy, at the Department of Labor. You'll find good advice and examples of how to make accommodations work for everyone concerned, so that the job gets done. Read such publications as: Accommodating Employees with Hidden Disabilities, Accommodations Get the Job Done, Disability Friendly Strategies for the Workplace, Employing People with Disabilities Q&A, Job Accommodations - Situations and Solutions, Personal Assistance Services in the Workplace, etc.

[www.t-tap.org/strategies/factsheet/disclosure.htm](http://www.t-tap.org/strategies/factsheet/disclosure.htm) A key component of customized employment involves negotiating an individualized employment relationship between a job seeker and an employer in ways that meet the needs of both. This may require disclosing the job seeker's disability. The resource at the link above, Customized Employment Q & A: Disclosure," will provide information about some key considerations to achieving effective disclosure in employment settings.

[www.ncwd-youth.info/resources\\_&\\_Publications/411.html](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/411.html) This workbook provides experiences and practices about disclosing a disability and provides youth with expertise about themselves. The workbook contains eight units with classroom activities or activities that youth may do independently. The units include Self-Determination, Rights and Responsibilities Under the Law, Accommodations, Post-Secondary Disclosure, Disclosure on the Job, and Disclosure in Social and Community Settings.