NASET's Education Children with Severe Disabilities Series

Employment Planning

General overview of services and experiences your student may be entitled to have during this period of transition.

Introduction

Once the vocational assessment process is complete, the student will be presented with a variety of training and work options, depending upon the results of the evaluation. Many options and directions are available.

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of employment options and procedures necessary for the preparation of a student with disabilities to adult life. After reading this section, you should understand the following:

- Internships
- Apprenticeships
- Adult education
- Trade and Technical Schools
- Competitive Employment
- Supported Employment
- How Do Parents Know If Their Children Need Supported Employment?
- Sheltered Workshops
- Other Avenues to Employment
- Volunteering
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- Developing a Resume
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Internships and Apprenticeships

Internships are similar to on-the-job training. They are time-limited, paid or unpaid jobs that permit the intern to sample the type of work available in a general field. Many high school and community transition programs offer individuals the opportunity to participate in an internship prior to competitive employment. By participating in an internship, individuals can learn more about the job and have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the work environment.

Apprenticeship programs have been a historical means of preparing competent and skilled workers. Apprenticeships offer individuals the opportunity to learn the skills necessary for an occupation by working under the supervision of experienced workers. These programs generally take from three to four years to complete, but participants are paid for their labor. In the beginning, wages may not be more than minimum wage, but by the end of the program, wages are usually nearly those earned by an experienced worker. Generally, the sponsor of the apprenticeship is a company or a group of companies, a public agency, or a union. Over 700 organizations are currently involved in apprenticeship programs.

Local unions, vocational education programs in the community, the state office of vocational rehabilitation, and the state employment office are all sources of more information about apprenticeship opportunities. Each state also has a state occupational informational coordinating committee (overseen at the federal level by the National Occupational Informational Coordinating Committee). These committees, to differing degrees in each state, provide systems for individuals to obtain information about apprenticeships. The Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training also has regional offices throughout the United States.

Training Offered by Disability-Specific Organizations

Organizations such as ARC (formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens), the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation (UCPF), and others serving people with a specific disability may provide vocational assessment and training. The types of training provided vary, but the goals of the training are that individuals with disabilities will obtain employment and become as independent as possible. As an example, many regional offices of ARC provide training in computer skills and other office skills to persons with mental retardation who have been referred to the ARC program. This training often leads to competitive employment for these individuals.

Adult Education

Adult education programs are designed to provide instruction below the college level to any person age 16 or older who is no longer being served by the public education system. There are many different programs available, and you can find them in a variety of settings. One setting of importance to youth seeking vocational training is an area vocational center. In many states, area vocational centers operate as part of the public school system. Secondary school students may receive vocational instruction in the area vocational center during the day, while instruction for adults in the community would generally be available there at night. Vocational courses may include training in such areas as health care, business education, home economics, industrial arts, marketing, or trades such as carpentry or automotive mechanics. The course of study might involve students in apprenticeships (discussed above), that can lead to certification in a trade or recognized occupation. Adult education programs may also be available to prepare individuals for GED (General Equivalency Diploma) tests or to teach English as a Second Language (ESL). Continuing education programs may also be offered under the auspices of adult education; however, continuing education is generally meant to provide personal enrichment rather than vocational training. For example, continuing education classes may be offered in areas such as cooking, gardening, or sewing.

Information about adult education programs--whether they are intended as vocational training or personal enrichment--can usually be obtained by contacting your local education agency.

Trade and Technical Schools

Trade and technical schools are designed to prepare students for gainful employment in recognized occupations. Examples include occupations such as air conditioning technician, bank teller, cosmetologist, dental assistant, data processor, electrician, medical secretary, surveyor, and welder. Vocational training is provided so that an individual can obtain skills in a specific area of interest or increase the level of skills he or she has already achieved. A course of study may take anywhere from two weeks to two years to complete, with the general entrance requirement of a GED or high school diploma. These schools typically place great importance on job placement for their graduates. If students are working with a high school counselor or a vocational counselor at the VR office in or near their community, one of these schools may be recommended to them as a way of getting the training they need.

Competitive Employment

Competitive employment can be defined as full-time or part-time jobs in the open labor market with competitive wages and responsibilities. Competitive employment is employment that the individual maintains with no more outside support than a co-worker without a disability would receive. The key word here is maintains. Although a student may make use of transition services available in the community in order to prepare for and find competitive employment, these services are temporary. Once the individual has the job, support from outside agencies is terminated, and the individual maintains, or does, the job on his or her own.

The types of jobs that are normally considered competitive employment are as vast in number as they are varied. Waitresses, service station attendants, clerks, secretaries, mechanics, professional drivers, factory workers, computer programmers and managers, professional's aides, professionals, health care workers, lawyers, scientists, and engineers are just some examples of people who are competitively employed. As can be seen by these examples, the amount of training an individual needs varies considerably from job to job. Some jobs are entry level and require little or no specific training. Other jobs require vocational preparation and training, while still others require extensive academic schooling.

Recently, a training model known as transitional employment has been useful in helping many young people prepare for competitive employment. Transitional employment is aimed at those individuals who cannot enter into competitive work on their own. With training and support, however, they may be able to handle a full wage job.

Among those who have benefited from transitional employment are individuals who are mentally disabled, learning disabled, or developmentally disabled, and persons with hearing and vision impairments.

The important thing to remember about competitive employment, however, is that the assistance and supports offered by a human services agency are time-limited in nature and end once the student has secured employment.

Supported Employment

Two aspects must be considered when confronted with vocational decisions--finding a job and keeping a job. The student may require little or no help with one or both aspects, or he or she may require a great deal of help. As we have seen, help with finding a job comes from the school system, in partnership with the vocational rehabilitation agency.

Supported employment (SE) enables people with disabilities who have not been successfully employed to work and contribute to society. SE focuses on a person's abilities and provides the supports the individual needs to be successful on a long-term basis. It allows people experiencing disabilities, their families, businesses, and their communities to experience the successes of people with disabilities. The partnership that SE has established between individuals experiencing disabilities and their communities is having a lasting impact on the way the public perceives people with disabilities. SE affords the public the opportunity to see the person for who they are rather than seeing the disability (The Association for Persons in Supported Employment, 2003)

Supported employment is a job with pay at a business in the community. Supported employment is for adults who:

- traditionally have not been considered part of the workforce
- need long-term support to be employed
- have one or more disabilities, such as mental retardation, autism, mental illness, traumatic brain injury, physical disabilities, severe learning disabilities, or severe behavioral challenges
- require intensive, repetitive, or adaptive assistance to learn new tasks

How Do Parents Know If Their Children Need Supported Employment?

If a child is already involved in a work situation or has been involved in the past, parents should be aware of several signals that may indicate the need for supported employment services. These include, but are not limited to:

- repeated failures to maintain employment without support
- failure or inability to generalize skills from pre-employment training programs
- problems acquiring skills
- significant communication problems where job-site advocacy would help
- social integration with co-workers and supervisors
- the need for extended training and support to develop production rates

Help for the child is provided by the same companies that specialize in finding employment for adults with disabilities. They can provide a job coach to give help directly to the child with disabilities. Optimally, the job coach will train the child's co-workers and supervisors to provide the supports that are needed to maintain his or her effectiveness on the job. Other services that are provided by job coaches include:

- travel training

- task analysis
- hands-on instruction
- developing job-modification accommodations
- developing visual or other tools to improve productivity
- training in appropriate job behaviors
- developing natural supports and social skills
- employee liaison-problem solving
- parent liaison
- advocate for employee with disability

The amount and kind of help that is provided to find and keep a job should be based on the needs and abilities of the student with disabilities. When a parent is involved with an agency that will provide employment services for the child, the parent will need to learn as much as possible about the agency in order to assess its ability to meet the child's vocational needs and goals. Therefore, parents should ask the following questions:

1. What types of jobs are available?
2. How does the agency select a job for an individual with disabilities?
3. Where are the actual job locations?
4. Does the agency provide individual or group placements?
5. How does the agency promote integration?
6. What are the average wages of employees?
7. What is the average number of hours worked per week?
8. What type of support does the agency provide?
9. Is transportation provided? What type, and by whom?
10. What are the average benefit packages available to employees?
11. What provisions does the agency have for employee and parent or family input?

Supported employment is a major avenue to inclusion of persons with disabilities in their communities. As a service, it also reflects the growing conviction by persons with disabilities and their families that they have the right to be involved in decisions affecting the quality of their lives.

While the transition from high school to adult life is a complex time for all students, it can be especially challenging for young people with disabilities. The goal of parents and professionals is to help the child make this transition to the world of work as easily as possible. Being informed and educated as to options, rights, and resources can only enhance the child's transition into the vocational phase of his or her life.

Sheltered Workshops

In sheltered employment options (sheltered workshops) individuals with disabilities work in a self-contained unit; they are not integrated with workers who do not have disabilities. Sheltered employment options typically range along a continuum from adult day programs to work activity centers to sheltered workshops. In adult day programs, individuals generally receive training in daily living skills, social skills, recreational skills, and prevocational skills. Work activity centers offer individuals similar training but may also include training in vocational skills. In sheltered workshops, individuals perform subcontracted tasks such as sewing, packaging, collating, or machine assembly and are usually paid on a piece-rate basis. Typically, people do not advance to the workshop until they have demonstrated certain mastery levels. Sheltered employment options are generally supported by federal and/or state funds and are operated by private, nonprofit corporations governed by a volunteer board of directors (Pierangelo and Crane, 1997).

Traditionally, sheltered employment options were thought to be the only options available for individuals with severe disabilities. There is now evidence from supported employment models that individuals with severe disabilities can work in community settings if provided with adequate support.

With the emergence of supported employment, many facilities began to modify their sheltered employment programs to provide workers with integrated options. Advocates of this trend away from sheltered employment point to the advantages of supported employment, which include higher wages, more meaningful work, and integration with workers who do not have disabilities.

Other Avenues to Employment

There are many avenues that lead to stable, satisfying employment. This section addresses other avenues a young person with a disability can take to employment--learning and growing along the way. For young people with disabilities, early job experiences are vital learning situations wherein they gain good work habits such as punctuality, responsibility, insight into appropriate behaviors, and standards of personal grooming. As such, initial jobs need not always place the individual on a career ladder.

Sometimes it is useful to take jobs as stepping stones in one's training, rather than as the final step in employment. Temporary work can be one such stepping stone. Employers often have trouble finding a person to take a job that will last only several weeks or months. For a young person with a disability, a temporary job may offer the opportunity to get valuable work experience, earn wages, and develop a work history. Part-time work is a similar stepping stone in many ways. Part-time employment offers many advantages for persons who need to attend school part of the day, or who may be uncertain as to their work stamina or tolerance. Job-sharing is another stepping stone, where two workers share the responsibilities of one full-time job. All of these examples can offer individuals meaningful employment that suits their schedule or their mental or physical abilities. These are also excellent ways by which to enter an organization, establish a reputation as a worker, and possibly move into a full-time job when one becomes available or is desired.

Programs also exist that are designed to provide experience outside of a traditional classroom, for example, volunteering and international exchange programs. Both types of programs offer personal enrichment to young adults and enhance their independence, self-advocacy skills, and their ability to make informed choices about further education and careers.

Volunteering

Volunteering enables a student or adult with a disability to develop a work history and can lead to paid employment. Some transition programs provide opportunities for young adults with disabilities to have volunteer experiences in several career areas as part of career exploration and selection. A volunteer organization in your community, county, or state may also be able to provide you with information about volunteer opportunities. At the national level, VOLUNTEER: The National Center for Citizen Involvement has been developing projects on the use of volunteers who have disabilities; this organization may be able to provide information specific to your locality. Contact VOLUNTEER at P.O. Box 1807, Boulder, CO 80306. Also at the national level is AmeriCorps, a federal agency that runs the VISTA program (Volunteers in Service to America). VISTA can be contacted, toll-free, at (800) 424-8867 for information and recruitment and current projects, as well as information about state and regional offices. The number for AmeriCorps is (800) 94-ACORPS.

International Exchange Programs

International exchange programs can also serve as stepping stones for young people with disabilities. While the programs cannot be considered employment, they nevertheless are personally enriching and, for a young person with a disability, lead to increased independence. There are two general types of international exchange programs: educational exchanges and international work camps. Educational exchange programs enable young adults to live, study, or volunteer in another country while living with a host family or with other participants in a dormitory.

International work camps bring persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities together to work on community projects in host countries. Individuals with disabilities have participated successfully in both kinds of international programs. For more information about exchange programs, contact Mobility International USA, P.O. Box 10767, Eugene, OR 97440, (503) 343-1284 (Voice/TDD) or The U.S. Committee of the International Christian Youth Exchange (ICYE), 134 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001, (212) 206-7307.

The Military

The military may also be viable postsecondary options for many young adults with disabilities. Some individuals with learning disabilities, for example, "can benefit from the highly structured, repetitive, and physically active regime of military life" (Scheiber & Talpers, 1987, p. 64). However, in order to pursue a career in the military, individuals must meet the qualifications of the specific branch of interest (e.g., the Navy). A student and/or parent should talk to a recruiter in the particular branch of interest prior to graduation in order to find out about requirements. It is also important to know that Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act does not cover uniformed personnel branches of the military; therefore, no particular accommodations are made regarding a person's disability unless that person is a civilian employee.

There are also opportunities for civilian service employees in military installations. The majority of these positions is in an administrative or support staff capacity. These provide opportunities for persons skilled in the areas of accounting, computer technology, contracting, and clerical duties. The best avenue for a person with a disability to take in order to obtain employment as a civilian is to be certified by the Vocational Rehabilitation System for Schedule A employment. The person may then apply directly to the federal government agency in which he or she is interested, including military installations around the nation and the world. Each installation in the military has to adhere to equal opportunity standards for employees in civilian positions.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a nontraditional avenue many individuals with disabilities have taken to employment. Rather than work for someone else, they decided to start a business of their own. For some persons, the focus of the business grew out of a hobby or a personal interest. An example of this is Don Krebs, who became a quadriplegic as a result of a water-skiing accident. After his recovery, Don searched for adaptive equipment to allow him to return to water-skiing, a sport he loved, and in the process recognized the great need for adaptive recreation equipment. Using money from SSDI and his Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS), Don started Access to Recreation, a mail-order company specializing in adaptive recreation equipment (Marks & Lewis, 1983).

Business Opportunities

Some individuals with disabilities who have successfully created their own business began with the desire to work out of their homes. Betty, for instance, is mobility-impaired and uses a wheelchair. She operates a direct mail order business from her home and sells eyeglass frames wholesale to optometrists and opticians.

Other people with disabilities have become involved in businesses their parents have created. Laura and Charles, for example, have a son who is severely mentally retarded. Concerned about Harold's employment prospects, Laura and Charles joined forces several years ago with two other families whose children are mentally retarded. Together, the parents purchased ten vending machines that they then situated in strategic locations. The young adults, who now range in age from 18 to 25, are responsible for tending to the machines--restocking them with sodas, retrieving the coins and rolling them up for deposit in the bank, and reporting any machine malfunctions to their parents.

Although it took the families several months to identify the most lucrative spots to place the vending machines, the amount of income generated by this small business has surprised them all.

Starting and Maintaining a Business

Starting and maintaining a business is a serious enterprise. The ingenuity, determination, and stamina of participants are important factors in producing success or failure. Operating a small business can offer many advantages to individuals with disabilities, however, such as minimizing transportation concerns, setting one's own work hours, and having the freedom to modify the job in whatever way is necessary to get the job done most efficiently, given the personality and disability of the individual. Persons interested in starting a business can contact the Small Business Administration for assistance and advice. SBA can also help you secure a loan through a bank or other commercial lender. SBA operates more than 100 local offices across the country. To find out if an office exists in your vicinity, consult your telephone directory or contact the SBA central office at 409 3rd Street, S.W., Information Center, Room 100, Washington, DC 20416, (202) 606-4000 (in the DC area) or (800)827-5722.

Job Search Methods

The remaining sections of this chapter are addressed to the young person who will be engaged in the job search--with assistance as needed from parents and professionals.

People look for jobs for many different reasons: they are laid off, they want to reenter the work force, they want or need to relocate, they dislike their present job, they want to get a better job, or they are entering the labor force for the first time. This section provides guidelines that will help the special educator assist the student with disabilities in preparing for and conducting a job search. Steps discussed include:

- developing a resume
- locating prospective employers
- applying for the job
- interviewing
- following through

These are only guidelines; you will find additional detailed information at your public library, or at high school or college career centers.

Developing a Resume

The two main types of resumes are the chronological and the functional. A chronological resume is used when an individual had a fairly direct path of development from one position to another in the same field. A functional resume emphasizes the student's skills, and is used by people who change jobs or careers frequently. A good resume will be one page long and will capture the individual's career goals and education and work history. For some positions, the student may have to include a sample of his/her writing.
A resume should include the following information:

- name
- address
- telephone number
- job objective or career goal

- educational history (degrees, certificates, courses, accomplishments)
  work history, including military service (skills, experience), and
- memberships related to your job objective

Depending on the position for which the student is applying, it might also include work-related honors or achievements, knowledge of foreign languages, ability to travel or relocate, and security clearance information

Job Application Forms

Some jobs do not require a formal resume but may call for a written application. Most application forms require such basic information as:

- name
- address and telephone number
- social security number
- dates of previous jobs
- names and addresses of former employers and
- dates of schooling or training

Before you have the student begin to fill out the application, have him/her read it through to be sure that all required information is available. It is very important that the student print the information neatly and legibly. He/she may need your assistance with this part of the application depending on the disability. If the application makes a poor impression, the student may unlikely to go further with that employer.

Although not every job calls for letters of reference, you may want to help the student ask people that they know if they would be willing to write one for the student. Make sure the student does not list someone as a reference unless he/she has his or her permission to do so. Candidates for references include former employers, professionals, volunteer supervisors, and other people who can assess your character.

Locating Employers

When the student has determined the kind of job he/she wants, he/she must locate potential employers. Among the most frequently used methods of finding them are making "cold calls"; getting information from friends, relatives, or colleagues; reading want ads; and using employment agencies. Usually, more than one source will be used and there are advantages and disadvantages to all methods.

Cold Calls

This technique involves visiting employers to see if there are openings. A person using this method of finding a job needs high motivation and good interpersonal skills. Sometimes, talking directly to the person who makes the hiring decision rather than the personnel office produces better results. Before calling on small companies, it is a good idea to call or write ahead of time; they may not appreciate interruptions. Letters, followed by phone calls, can be effective for small and medium-sized businesses. Advantages of cold calls are that some jobs are not listed anywhere, the opening may be new, and you may be in the right place at the right time. Disadvantages include the time involved and the high rejection rate.

Networking

Networking is an approach to getting employment by discussing your situation, wants, and needs with people whom you know that could help you enter a particular field or get a specific job. Learning about an opening through friends, relatives, or co-workers is the most successful way to get a job; most employers do not like to hire strangers. They know that people who are referred to a company tend to be more stable and therefore will stay longer in the job. Advantages of networking are that referrals often guarantee an interview, jobs offered often are better with higher pay, and it is easier to develop a relationship with the potential employer when referred by a colleague.

Newspaper Ads

Many people start their job search with want ads. This is unfortunate because it is frequently a last resort for employers. Advantages of classified ads are that they list specific openings and have frequent new listings. Disadvantages are that the jobs are often undesirable or hard to fill, or have a high turnover rate; positions are often at the high and low ends of the skill/experience spectrum--few in the middle; there is little information about the job or employer; competition is intense; and ads list a small proportion of available jobs.

Employment Agencies

Public employment services are funded by the federal government and administered by states. They are widely viewed as ineffective, primarily offering low-paying, low-status jobs. Their main advantage is that there is no cost to the client or employer.

Disadvantages are that they are usually looking for unskilled or casual labor, there are fewer occupations offered than are listed in want ads, and they offer limited opportunities.

Employment agencies will, for a fee, try to match employers and employees. Depending on the agency and the position offered, the fee may be paid entirely by the employer or by the employee, or they may split it. Some agencies specialize in a particular field such as clerical work or sales. Private agencies tend to be more successful with experienced people who have sharply defined skills, good work histories, and employment in a single field. Advantages are that they offer a chance for employer and prospective employee to explore the possibility of a permanent relationship, and they may list positions not offered elsewhere. The main disadvantage is the fee.

Applying and Interviewing for Jobs

Once the student has found a job that sounds good, he/she must apply for it. This involves writing to the company offering the job and including his/her resume or a job application. In either case, a cover letter is very important; it is the first thing that the prospective employer will see. The letter should be personalized and contain information such as where the student heard about the job, an indication of his/her interests, why he/she is suited for the position, and his/her interest in interviewing. It should include the student's name, address, and phone number.

The next step in the job search is the job interview, which involves an exchange between people trying to find out whether they can work together to mutual benefit. Before you have the student go to the interview, help him/her learn as much as he/she can about a prospective employer by reading brochures, talking to present employees, calling the chamber of commerce, or visiting the public library.

Some interviewing dos and don'ts: do be honest; be prompt (better ten minutes early than one minute late); use a firm handshake; dress appropriately; make eye contact; address interviewer by name--pronounced correctly; use good grammar; know something about the company; prepare to ask intelligent and thoughtful questions; don't sound arrogant; be too personal; smoke or chew gum; make excuses; bring up salary at the first interview.

After the interview, it is important to maintain contact with the prospective employer. Have the student write a thank-you letter, indicating that he/she will call at a specific time to find out your status regarding the position. Have the student call when he/she said he/she would. If the answer is no, have the student ask why. Knowing why he/she did not get a job may help him/her get the next one.

Applicants or Employees with Disabilities in State or Local Government Agencies

If a state or local government employer employs fifteen or more people, an individual with a disability is covered by Title I of the ADA, enforced by the EEOC. A state or local government that employs fifteen or more employees is also covered by Title II of the ADA, which is enforced by the U.S. Department of Justice.

To file a complaint, contact the nearest EEOC office or call (800) 669-4000 (Voice) or (800)800-3302 (TTY/TDD).

If a state or local government employer employs fewer than fifteen employees, an individual with a disability is covered by Title II of the ADA, enforced by the U.S. Department of Justice.

To file a complaint, send it to the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Coordination and Review Section, P.O. Box 66118, Washington, DC, 20035-6118.

If a state or local employer receives federal financial assistance, an individual with a disability is also covered by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, enforced by the federal agency that provided the federal financial assistance. The enforcement of Section 504 is coordinated by the U.S. Department of Justice.

To file a complaint, send it to the agency that provided the funds or to the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Coordination and Review Section, P.O. Box 66118, Washington, DC, 20035-6118.

Individuals do not have to exhaust administrative procedures under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. They may file suit against a public entity in federal district court, without filing a complaint with an administrative agency.

Conclusion

Transition from the secondary school system to the world of adult life and adult responsibilities is a complex time for all young people. Young adults with disabilities and their families often find this time particularly challenging. To achieve the end goal of transition -- which, according to Halpern (1985) is to live successfully in one's community -- requires much planning, consideration, exploration, and self-determination. Young people with disabilities must make decisions and take action in regards to three critical areas in their lives which are likely to undergo a transition as they become adults. These areas are: their residence, or where they will live in the community, their personal life, which involves self-esteem, maturity, family, friends, and intimate relationships, and employment, which requires appropriate training and education, job search skills, and knowledge of important employee behaviors (Halpern, 1985). Successfully addressing these three issues is what will lead young people -- those with disabilities and those without -- to a successful life as an adult in the community.