

Preparing for Employment: On the Home Front

Introduction

Young people looking for their first jobs may be overwhelmed by the process and seek help from others. Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams can help young people with disabilities develop a plan that includes employment goals. Schools can also help youth develop specific career skills by guiding students to courses needed to enter a particular field, helping students practice interviewing and asking for employment accommodations, or offering work-based learning opportunities.

Work-based learning during the school years leads to better postschool employment outcomes (Hughes, Moore, & Bailey, 1999). Volunteer experiences and unpaid internships, in addition to paid employment, can be steppingstones to future employment. Youth and their families need not rely solely on school programs to pursue such opportunities. They can do much on their own to launch the youth's career search. Recent studies demonstrate the effectiveness of using personal networks as a job search strategy (Timmons, Hamner, & Boes, 2003), and highlight the fact that families make key contributions to successful employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (26th Institute on Rehabilitation Issues, 2000).

There are creative ways to combine community relationships, a young person's interests, and family or personal networks to help a young person effectively explore work-based learning outside of school settings. Parents may seek opportunities through co-workers, relatives, and neighbors. Moreover, parents often know their children better than professionals do and can help their sons and daughters explore their unique abilities, strengths, and interests—all of which may lead to an appropriate career path.

Many practical strategies for preparing a young adult with disabilities for employment are not difficult. These include such things as assigning chores at home, encouraging youth to volunteer in their community, or keeping an eye open for employment opportunities. Families can adopt these or other approaches within their own communities or share their ideas with the IEP team. The insights of family members can serve as the basis for strategies and services identified in a student's IEP transition goals. Youth can also learn to be self-advocates in seeking a good job.

Self-Determination: Youth Can Take Control

Ultimately, to be successful in the workplace, youth must develop skills that allow them to become as independent as possible. Skills such as self-knowledge, goal setting, decision making, problem solving, and self-advocacy are crucial for young people with disabilities. These skills are all considered aspects of self-determination. Research supports the idea that youth who leave high school with self-determination skills have a greater chance of achieving positive postschool outcomes than those who do not (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Self-determined youth will also

be able to exert greater control in the selection and use of adult services and supports in their postsecondary education and employment goals.

Parents can help their children develop self-determination skills by creating a supportive environment, which allows youth to take risks, test their abilities and limitations, develop their problem solving skills, and practice positive work habits and behaviors. Although parents can do much to launch their sons and daughters into the work force, their children's future is their own. An understanding of oneself, including how one's health and disability will impact work, is key to becoming an effective self-advocate and essential to postsecondary education and employment success.

Juan: Taking the Initiative

Juan, an 18-year-old who grew up in Mexico, recently moved to Minneapolis with his family. Although Juan dropped out of school before earning his diploma, he received four years of education in the United States and had been diagnosed with a learning disability. He wanted to increase his employability by gaining work skills and experience, but he also worried that the lack of a diploma would be an obstacle to a job that pays well. One day a friend told him about a work program at a local community center, and Juan decided to check it out. The program was a youth employment and training program funded by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The staff helped Juan to earn his GED, increase his work-readiness skills, and understand his disability and how it might affect his work style. Now Juan feels prepared to explain his learning disability and ask for appropriate accommodations once he is offered a job.

Learning About Skills, Needs, and Interests

Starting a journey toward successful employment may seem more difficult than the journey itself. Often young people blossom once they are given a chance to prove themselves, and a career path is more easily identified using the new knowledge of their skills and interests.

Learning About Themselves

Parents can help organize and clarify a young person's strengths, needs, and interests. Keep in mind a student's skills and preferences:

- Perceptual skills: ability to judge where, how, and if things fit together
- Interpersonal skills: attitude, cooperation, teamwork, and communication skills. Look at how a student gets along with family, people in the community, peers, teachers, and employers
- Work aptitudes: ability to remember and follow instructions and procedures; ability to plan, organize, and improve with practice
- Work behaviors: ability to concentrate and stay on a task and ability to remain motivated
- Interests: personal goals and interests, hobbies, leisure-time activities, academics, and favorite and least-favorite subjects
- Cognitive skills: reading and math skills, concept formation, thinking style, and problem solving abilities

- Motor skills: using one's hands, eye/hand coordination, fine motor skills, and mobility (PACER, 2003)

It is also important to talk with a young person about his or her dreams. A young person should answer questions such as: What do I do well? What is hard for me? What do I like to do?

Maria: What Kind of Job Do I Want?

Maria, 18, wanted to get a summer job, but didn't she know what she wanted to do. Her father realized the importance of finding employment for Maria that suited her strengths and interests. He knew that, because of her developmental disability, Maria might not be successful in a job where she felt pressured or one where she had to follow multiple directives. Before Maria started looking for summer employment, she and her father explored her expectations for a career. They were able to identify that Maria preferred to work outside, in a casual environment, and have a flexible schedule. Maria also expressed concerns that she would not be able to count change; she did not want to work as a cashier. With this information, Maria and her father started the job search and found a part-time position at a tree farm. The time Maria and her father spent talking about careers, her interests, and her likes and dislikes helped her focus the job search and find a summer job she really liked. It also gave her a head start on developing an Individual Plan for Employment with the counselor from the state vocational rehabilitation agency that she will begin working with in the fall.

Résumé Basics: Work Experience and References

Putting Together a Résumé

Paid work experience is not the only thing that makes a job applicant's résumé appealing to an employer. Employers appreciate a young person who shows the motivation to do a good job. Youth who may be too young or not ready for a paid job can create a résumé and gain valuable experience by doing jobs around the house or neighborhood or by volunteering even for a day. Including a list of informational interviews conducted by youth in a résumé can also help document an individual's initiative as well as vocational education experiences. Parents can help youth identify the types of experiences that may be included in the youth's résumé.

Adam: Résumé and References

Adam, who is 14 and has Down Syndrome, was too young to have a job, but he was eagerly looking forward to finding a job the following year. He had learned about résumés in school but wondered what he could list on one since he had no previous employment. However, Adam had been mowing several lawns in the neighborhood, and his mother suggested that he ask some of his clients for a reference letter. After making sure that he was on time and did a good job with every lawn all summer, Adam asked his neighbors if they might provide him with letters. To his amazement everyone was willing. He was proud of the letters that highlighted his hard work and his traits of being prompt and considerate. The next summer he took the letters with him to an interview at a lawn-care service. The manager was extremely impressed and offered Adam a job.

Shayla: Looking Ahead

Shayla, 20, has a chronic health condition. She currently works 12 hours a week busing tables at a restaurant. She appreciates having the job and the spending money it provides, but she is also interested in exploring other vocations. At school, she participated in a career interest assessment, which her parents helped her complete. The assessment noted that she would enjoy the responsibility and organization of office work. Shayla agreed and asked her parents if they knew anyone who worked in an office. She had learned about informational interviews in school and wanted to conduct one with someone who worked in her field of interest. Her uncle, a warehouse shipping supervisor, arranged for Shayla to speak to the office manager. Not only did she learn about office work, she also gained an experience to add to her résumé. Shayla is currently taking office skills classes in school and plans to look for an office job when she graduates.

Job Satisfaction and Long-Term Goals

Matching a person's strengths and interests to a job is important to ensuring long-term success and job satisfaction (Dawis, 1987; Jagger, Neukrug, & McAuliffe, 1992; Mank, 2003). Youth should explore vocations that interest them. Matching youth with jobs that suit their interests and strengths is one way to promote success in the workplace.

Combining Formal and Natural Supports

Many youth with significant disabilities use job coaches, assistive technology, and/or workplace accommodations when entering employment. These formal supports can be provided or funded by service providers from special education, county social services, waiver programs, vocational rehabilitation, or developmental disabilities systems. Formal supports can be short term or extend long into the course of an individual's employment. Parents and youth should also be aware of natural supports that may be available in the workplace. Natural supports include training, job sharing, mentoring, and flexible scheduling. An example of a natural support is when a more experienced employee helps a co-worker solve a problem. Natural supports are provided directly by the employer (not an outside agency) and may be generally available to employees who are not disabled. Natural supports are appealing to employers because they are generally low cost. They are also appealing to people with disabilities and their families because they promote normal interaction and relationships with co-workers.

Involving co-workers in support of employment is important even when an individual requires formal supports from an outside agency. Employees with disabilities who receive natural supports from coworkers are more likely to have more typical work roles, higher wages, and positive relationships with co-workers (Mank, 2003). It may require some effort to find the right situation for a person who needs extra support on the job, but once in place, a system of natural supports can increase the feelings of accomplishment and independence on the job for a person with a disability.

Barbara: Personal Connections Build Natural Supports

Barbara, 16, has a moderate cognitive disability. She was very excited about having a job but required a certain level of on-the-job training and supervision to be successful. A job coach was not available through her special education program, and Barbara did not yet qualify for other services to pay for a job coach. One day while grocery shopping, Barbara's mother noticed her arranging disheveled stock on the shelves and tending to empty shopping carts. The next day Barbara's mother called the store and spoke to the manager. The manager knew that Barbara's family were long-time customers and was willing to give Barbara a job on a trial basis. The manager was also willing to recruit other workers in the store to act as Barbara's support staff. Now, Barbara not only has a job, but she has also gained many friends who help her every day. She doesn't need much help now that she has mastered most of the daily tasks of her work at the store.

Using Your Personal Network

Most people have a circle of contacts within a community. Relatives, friends, co-workers, and people who own or work at the grocery stores, restaurants, or other businesses regularly patronized by a family can have potential job leads. Think outside of your close friends and acquaintances. The personal contacts of IEP team members may also lead to independent job opportunities. The vast majority of jobs are gained not by responding to an advertisement in the newspaper, but by using contacts. Using this method can also help identify safe and familiar work site locations. Don't despair if this method does not yield results right away. Sometimes notifying friends and acquaintances will prompt them to think of you when a job opportunity arises in the future.

John: Spreading the Word

John, a 16-year-old with spina bifida, was hoping to find a summer job. Spanish was both a strong interest and an academic strength of John's, and he had previously identified improving his Spanish language ability as an IEP goal. He hoped to find a summer job that would help him build his Spanish-speaking skills. Because he uses a wheelchair, John would also need to find a setting that was wheelchair accessible. He mentioned his goal at his IEP meeting his junior year. A district administrator attending John's IEP meeting was a close friend of a principal at a Spanish immersion elementary school that conducted an annual summer camp—in a school building that had recently been renovated to meet the accessibility standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Hearing of John's interest, the administrator called her friend, who welcomed the idea of having a student volunteer. Personal connections helped create a successful volunteer opportunity for John at the summer camp—and eventually a part-time job the following year.

Josh: Getting By With a Little Help From Friends

Josh is a 16-year-old with a significant learning disability. He is also an avid sports fan. Josh received special education services in school. He identified the goal of exploring employment opportunities in a sports-related field with his IEP team during the school year. When Josh expressed an interest in finding a summer job, he and his parents began his job search by

brainstorming ideas for jobs he might like—such as working at a health club, selling sports equipment, or working at the baseball stadium, or a park and recreation summer program. Next, he and his parents mapped a network of contacts, identifying relatives, friends, and co-workers, who might have leads. In all they listed 20 people they could ask about opportunities for Josh. The husband of a co-worker knew of a part-time opening as a golf course attendant. Josh was able to land the job. Josh was thrilled, because he loves watching Tiger Woods on television.

Unpaid Work Experience Can Lead to Paid Jobs

Building Confidence Through Volunteering

Learning on the job is the best way to develop job skills. However, young people with disabilities may need help obtaining real work experience. School guidance counselors, religious leaders, or friends may know of job shadowing, volunteer, or internship opportunities for youth. When young people feel too insecure to find volunteer work on their own, parents or other family members can help them overcome their initial anxiety by offering to volunteer together. Through experience, youth will see they have the ability to work on their own.

Calvin: Volunteering Opens Doors

Calvin, 16, was looking for his first job but was having difficulty finding one. Jobs in his neighborhood were scarce. Although he had a hearing impairment, he did not receive services that would help him find a part-time job after school hours. One evening, Calvin's mother mentioned his situation to a cousin, who works as the kitchen supervisor for a local retirement residence. Calvin's cousin suggested that Calvin gain some work experience by volunteering there on the weekends. At first Calvin only prepared for and cleaned up after lunches on Saturdays, but soon he was asked if he could work more hours. Calvin was such a hard worker that he was offered a paying position in the kitchen. Now, because of his upbeat attitude and strong work ethic, he is a favorite among staff and residents.

Robert: Volunteer Experiences Build a Résumé

Robert is an active 15-year-old with Attention Deficit Disorder. Over the summer, students in Robert's high school work-skills class were encouraged to add one volunteer work experience to their résumé. One day, Robert's brother saw an ad recruiting volunteers to work at an upcoming marathon. Robert loves spending time in the out of doors, but was nervous about responding on his own. He agreed, however, when his brother said he would volunteer along with him. Both brothers were assigned responsibility for filling and distributing water at a point on the race route. Robert had so much fun that worked by himself at three other races and one family-fun day at the health club that summer. Robert impressed his work-skills teacher by having five volunteer experiences on his résumé. He continues to volunteer and has applied for a paying position at the health club.

Where to Find More Information on Work-based Learning:

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET)

www.ncset.org

PACER Center

www.pacer.org/swift

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth

www.ncwd-youth.info

Summary

Youth with disabilities who participate in quality work-based learning activities have more successful post-school outcomes, including employment and further education. Real-life work experiences help a young person develop important “soft skills” such as teamwork and time management, make career decisions, network with potential employers, and develop job skills relevant to future employment. They also help youth assess the impact of their disability in an employment setting and learn what job accommodations they need in the workplace. Using their combined resources, youth, families, and IEP teams can ensure that work-based learning opportunities are a good match with a student’s individual interests, strengths, and needs. These experiences not only help youth to build their résumés, but provide the foundation for a life of increased earning and self determination.

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