

# Preparing for Employment: On the Home Front

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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.

## **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?

## **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.

## **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.

## **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.

### **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.