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Customized Employment and Transition: 10 Effective Steps to Vocational Success

By Cary Griffin

Introduction

Joey has never had a real job. He carries a label of autism. He uses Facilitated Communication, a Dynavox, and limited sign language to communicate. Joey faced a major life transition with a plan generated through a practical assessment process called Discovering Personal Genius (DPG). This assessment, which gathers existing information and is not predicated on predicting future success, helped the team from his community rehabilitation program catalog Joey's skills and generate a list of three overarching "vocational themes." For each theme, a "list of twenty" was prepared. These three lists represented sixty unique places where people with the same skills and interests worked in his hometown. Refining these listings of "where the career makes sense" guide employment development activities and represents the latest advances in solid career development strategies. Transition, after all, is supposed to be an outcome, not simply a process (Griffin & Keeton, 2009).

Joey worked with his team locating places where his skills could develop, and where his interests would keep him enthralled. His interests and burgeoning skills in gardening and in horses led to his part-time work cleaning stables and grooming horses, and to retaining a community garden plot where he could grow carrots as horse treats. As his wages increased, he paid for additional riding lessons, and set up a table at horse events where he sold carrots, and locally purchased treats, and grew his social capital among other equestrian enthusiasts. As Joey transitions to life as a community member, he has a part-time job where he learns critical career skills; he is around others who share his interests and have his success at heart; and he owns a small, but real, business that is growing as he adds new products from his supply chain. Today, only about 22% of adults with developmental disabilities are working (Griffin, Hammis, Geary, 2007). However, with a bit of planning and an understanding of employment options, people with disabilities can attain vocational success.

Customizing Employment

Joey's story serves as an inventive, but simple, approach to creating employment. Traditional competitive employment fails people with disabilities. There are many entry-level jobs available for people with disabilities, but career advancement, and doing what

one loves is rare for individuals with significant disabilities. Therefore, changing our understanding of employment and our approach to getting jobs is necessary. The starting point is knowing the process, what's possible, and what resources are available. The following 10 Points will help guide career development:

Avoid Comparison. At the heart of Customized Employment (CE) is the realization that when two applicants are compared to one another by an employer, the one with the disability almost always loses. So, use social networks, paid internships and work experiences, and family/school connections to develop jobs. Also, recognize that there are unlimited ways to make a living in this world, and by being pro-active (i.e. creating a business), one is no longer captive to what the labor market may offer.

Focus on Skills. Far too often, Transition age youth are asked what they like. While interests do indeed reinforce the quest for knowledge, starting with one's skills and talents is a better career development approach. Many people have interests but lack the skills to compete. Skills are at the heart of success, so make certain from a young age that your child is accumulating experiences that feed talents of value in the marketplace. A child who makes toast every morning for the family has a good shot at working in a restaurant, or starting their own. Don't support passive experiences; get your child into the action where they'll learn to wash their clothes, change a car's oil, milk a cow, run a computer, mow a lawn, bake a cake. These simple skills represent the foundation of vocational success.

Raise expectations. Families are often discouraged from having dreams for their children with disabilities, which results in many adults living lives of isolation and poverty. Expecting children to grow up and work is a crucial first step to success. Make certain that children have household chores, after-school jobs, and summer employment.

Expectations are followed by action. One critical activity is saving for the future. Families should consider establishing an "employment fund" for their child just as they might for a sibling expected to attend college. This fund can be used for advanced training, buying tools, securing transportation, or starting a business.

Advocate for real work experience. Work experiences should be paid either by the school, an arrangement through a youth employment program sponsored by the local Workforce Center or One-Stop, by Vocational Rehabilitation, or by the employer. These time-limited try-outs match the interests of the individual and reveal the supports necessary for success, the best teaching approaches, and illuminate future options for work and study. Wages build a work ethic, garner peer status, and reinforce the connection between labor and reward. Most of us had after school or summer jobs as children, and we got paid for that work.

Augment exploitable resources. The best jobs go to those who earn profits for their employer. Special Education graduates do not typically bring obvious exploitable skills to the employer, therefore having equipment or tools that enhance employability are crucial

to career advancement. Using valued resources to secure employment is the analogous to using a college degree to get a job (Griffin, Hammis & Geary, 2007).

Apply for Social Security. As graduation approaches, parents should investigate eligibility for the Social Security (SSA) system. Social Security provides a variety of work incentives available to students including the Student Earned Income Exclusion which allows those enrolled in educational programs to earn up to \$1640 per month and \$6,600 per year before reducing SSI monthly payments (www.ssa.gov).

Social Security also allows for the Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS). This work incentive allows an individual to maintain a monthly check and simultaneously receive SSA payments to pursue a career, pay for transportation, get training or degrees, or start a business of their own (Griffin, et al, 2014).

Arrange for a smooth transition. Many states have waiting lists for adult services, so graduating with a paid job, and plenty of work experience is crucial. Apply to the state for case management services and apply for vocational supports at the local One-Stop center.

Consider self employment as an option. Business ownership is the fastest growing employment option in America today and many people with disabilities have skills and interests that easily translate into moneymaking opportunities. Consider starting early and remember how young most children are when they open their first lemonade stand.

Use the family network. Most people get their jobs through personal contacts. Families consume local goods and services and have friends and colleagues. Use these contacts to advocate for and leverage work experiences and jobs for your child with a disability. Many families also have business owners among their membership. Call on these relatives for advice, orders, and customer referrals.

References

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Many employment resources are available at www.griffinhammis.com ; www.centerforsocialcapital.org; www.start-up-usa.biz; <http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition> ; www.worksupport.com ; www.employmentforall.org; www.mntat.org

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