



Optimizing Employment: Job Development Tips for Job Seekers and Their Families

Part One

"What Talents Can You Bring to an Employer or Customer?"

By George Tilson, Ed.D.

Getting a job is a job; finding work is work. So said some wise advisor I encountered years ago. While it's true that sometimes good opportunities seem to fall out of the sky and into our laps -- more often than not finding a meaningful job takes goal-setting, effort, connections, and an understanding of oneself. My advisor's words of wisdom have helped me in my own career but have also guided my work with job seekers, their families, agencies and schools over the past 30 years.

In this article I will summarize the key points I make in my presentation titled "Optimizing Employment: Ten Job Development Tips for Job Seekers and their Families." Hopefully these "tricks of the trade" will help you see more possibilities, gain new insights into what your job seeker potentially has to offer employers, and identify those sometimes hidden opportunities. You can implement these ideas on your own, or in partnership with school or agency professionals.

This article will be a two-parter. Part One will focus on identifying what the job seeker has to offer, by developing a Positive Personal Profile. Part Two will cover strategies for uncovering job opportunities

and connecting with employers -- and ensuring that everyone in the employment relationship feels competent, confident and comfortable.

To me, it seems that finding work we consider to be personally meaningful, satisfying and -- yes enjoyable -- is summed up in this equation: Talent + Opportunity + Support. This is true for everyone, regardless of their educational or intellectual levels. It applies to those with college degrees and those who are more likely to receive their training "on the job."

TALENT

In order for someone to get a "real" job (that is, a job where they are hired and paid directly by an employer in a setting that includes co-workers who do not have disabilities) one must be able to demonstrate to a prospective employer that they have something to offer. They must have some sort of talent. Talent isn't limited to musical, artistic, or athletic, although if your job seeker has those kinds of abilities they should

be duly acknowledged. Talent may come in the form of the following skills: academics; manual/physical ability; people skills; technical aptitude; logical/problem-solving; and the so-called "soft skills" which include getting along with others, teamwork, initiative, and fitting in to the workplace culture.

There are many job opportunities where someone with less academic ability can capitalize on other talents they have. For example, I worked with a young woman who was uncanny in her ability to assemble complex jigsaw puzzles. Even though Veronica could only read at a 2nd grade level -- she had amazing visual-spatial aptitude and excellent fine motor ability. There are jobs out there that need people with those skills. She is now working in a firm that assembles cables for robots. Robert kept his room at the group home incredibly well organized, including color-sorting everything in it! A large discount store with a shoe department in disarray was thrilled to hire him.

Think of your son or daughter -- what talents and skills do they have? These are called transferable skills!

Sharonne is very dramatic and even though she can't read, she can fake it -- entertaining young children with her lively rendition of storybooks.

She is a very popular employee at the nursing facility where she helps the elderly in the dining room. Davis can maneuver his power wheelchair with the agility of a NASCAR driver. We capitalized on those skills to help him land a job tending plants in a nursery of a large national chain store. My neighbors' son is a daredevil on a skateboard; his parents worry that he isn't doing well in school. I suggested while they continue to emphasize the importance of school, they should also acknowledge that he is a well-coordinated, fearless risk-taker. Think of the future jobs that depend on those attributes! These are examples of skills that take place in everyday life (or hobbies) that can be applied to work settings. Think of your son or daughter – what talents and skills do they have? These are called transferable skills!

In addition to skills, it is important to recognize the unique interests your sons or daughters have. Sometimes these are expressed in hobbies, recreational and social pursuits – or they may even be evidenced through things that captivate their attention around the house or on TV. What kind of shows do your sons and daughters really enjoy? Are there clues to possible career areas? I once helped a man find a job collecting golf balls at a driving range. His mother was concerned he wouldn't find a job because he was obsessive compulsive about picking things off the ground and off the floor!

Temperament is another thing to note. Some of us are easy going, others are more driven. Some of us like to be the life of the party, while others prefer to be quiet observers.

It is important to acknowledge temperament because it offers clues as to the types of environments in which the person will flourish. Personality is another key factor in where and how well people will fit in to different settings. What do people really appreciate about your son or daughter? These are selling points to prospective employers.

What kinds of work experiences have your sons and daughters had? These may be previous paid jobs (full or part time) or they may have been internships or volunteer positions. These still count as work experiences. Perhaps your sons and daughters do chores around the house, or help their neighbors, or volunteer with their places of worship. These are all work experiences.

Identify Specific Challenges and Barriers

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Once you have identified the positive attributes of your job seeker, it is then time to pinpoint those challenges or barriers the individual faces that might impact employment. This will give additional clues as to work experiences to avoid – or more importantly, the kinds of accommodations and supports job seekers might need in order to capitalize on their talents and lessen the effects of the barriers. Here are some examples. If there is no access to public transportation, you may have to look for work within walking distance, or arrange to get rides from others, or take cabs. If your medication makes you really sleepy in the morning, then finding a job where you can work in the afternoon and evening might be ideal. If you have trouble remembering the sequence of steps to performing a task, perhaps pictures of the steps would help you. We know a young man who frequently got turned around going from the bus stop to his workplace. He now uses the GPS programmed on his smart phone and gets to work with no problem. Another person had trouble concentrating on her work; she was easily distracted and wanted to say hello to anyone who passed her work area. When the boss allowed her to listen to her iPod she was able to focus on the work at hand. It may be that the barrier your job seeker faces is a lack of available jobs. We will discuss this fully in Part Two: "Where are All the Opportunities?"

I invite you to contact me with any questions, comments, and strategies you'd like to share related to the ideas in this article. Best wishes!

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Create a "Positive Personal Profile"

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My colleagues and I encourage job seekers and their families to develop what we call a Positive Personal Profile (PPP). This is essentially a way to highlight and showcase all of the attributes we discussed above. The PPP is an inventory of all those things an individual potentially has to offer an employer. It can also be a very useful worksheet for a resume or for interview practice. The components of the PPP include: goals and aspirations (and dreams for the future), skills, interests/hobbies, positive personality traits/temperament, work history, preferred settings, and dislikes. The PPP is meant to be developed over time, with as much input as possible directly from the job seeker as well as people who have a high regard for him or her. Information can come from talking with folks and observing the job seekers in many different settings. There may also be useful information from assessments and records. However, most important is that all of this information should be positive and upbeat. Again these will be the "selling points" to a prospective employer.

Optimizing Employment: Job Development Tips for Job Seekers and Their Families

Part Two

"Where are All the Opportunities?"

By George Tilson, Ed.D.

In part one of this 2-part article, I introduced my formula for successful employment: Talent + Opportunity + Support. The focus of the discussion was on identifying all the positive attributes that a job seeker might capitalize on when looking for employment. We talked about creating a positive personal profile that would highlight all these attributes. In addition we noted the importance of identifying the specific challenges or barriers an individual might face that could potentially impact employment and, more importantly, finding ways to address these barriers with creative solutions. So now that you know the TALENT of your job seeker, it's time to focus on the next element in the equation.

OPPORTUNITY

Not everyone lands their dream job. Most of us are happy if we can find one that suits us pretty well. And some of us are glad that we have a job, period; especially in this challenging economic climate. Some are fortunate to work full time with benefits; while others have one or two part time jobs, without benefits. Some are careful to earn up to a certain amount, in order to retain social security benefits. Some

dream of being their own bosses – by operating a small business. All of these scenarios have something in common. They assume there are opportunities out there -- that employers are looking for certain talent -- or customers are eager to buy the products and services you sell through your business.

Right off the bat I want to emphasize the top three ways that people find their jobs: connections, connections, connections. So be sure to tell everyone you know, and everyone you meet: "My son/daughter is looking for a job (or work experience) in the area of _____. Do you know anyone we could talk to?" And whenever possible, the job seeker should be doing this as well.

There's an old adage that says "People do business with people they _____ (know, like, trust). Chances are you got your job (or a previous job) through someone you knew. And yet, often people with disabilities don't have this advantage because they are less connected to people in the community (beyond family, family friends, and those who are

paid to be around them). If you believe that your job seekers – as illustrated in their positive personal profiles – have something to offer a business, then you want to let as many people as possible know. This is called networking – and it works. I'll bet if I got a roomful of people together and gave them a list of 100 occupational categories, and then asked them to put a checkmark next to the occupations where they knew someone who worked in that field – all of the categories would be checked off. Powerful stuff! If your son is interested in working in culinary arts, ask people if they know anyone who works in that field. If your daughter wants to be a veterinarian, spread the word. "Do you know anyone who works in the animal care business?"

Many career seekers with disabilities have had little opportunity to explore their communities and businesses.

Perhaps you've heard of "The Hidden Job Market." Imagine a pie chart divided into two sections: 20% and 80%. Did you know that only 20% of job opportunities are advertised? That means 80% of the opportunities are filled from within: the employers hire people they know or people that are

recommended to them. What's striking is that 80% of job seekers (and their advocates) go after the 20% of jobs that are advertised. Talk about competition! But just think of all the possibilities that are out there through networking.

In addition to networking, there are certainly a number of other ways to see what's out there opportunity-wise. Scour the business section of the newspaper; check out the Chamber of Commerce and other business and civic organizations; visit your local one-stop workforce development center (go to www.servicelocator.org to find a center nearest you); check out the Yellow Pages (the old fashioned one and the online version); browse the internet (what company, large or small, doesn't have a website?); walk around your neighborhood (check out those office buildings, strip malls, industrial parks – you'd be amazed at the diverse businesses that you never knew existed); go to career fairs and trade shows; and always talk to people who work in the very companies where you are a customer!

I think this is a good time to mention my belief that many people miss out on opportunities because they can't clearly define their interests. And many job seekers can't identify their interests because they have never really explored what's out there. Imagine you have spent your whole life by yourself, in your house, without a TV, radio or computer. One day you emerge from your house and someone asks you: "What are you interested in doing?" or "Tell me about your experiences." Certainly you would be able to describe the features of your house, but chances are you wouldn't be able to talk about much else.

It's pretty obvious why: you haven't been exposed to new things. Many career seekers with disabilities have had little opportunity to explore their communities and businesses. They've never learned about the many options out there – so it is extremely difficult for them to aspire to much beyond what they know or what they have experienced.

I'm fond of saying "Exposure precedes interest." Our job is to make sure that our sons and daughters have

as many opportunities as possible to explore their communities and to see and experience many different types of occupations. Find out what businesses (1) exist in your community, (2) hire people to do the kind of work that matches your job seeker's profile, and (3) have the kind of "atmosphere" that would mesh with your job seeker's personality and preferences.

Informational Interviews

You would be pleased to know there are many business people who would welcome you to visit their organizations. First learn all you can about the company beforehand – through the internet. Tell them you and your son or daughter are interested in learning more about the business, the kinds of work that goes on, what they look for in employees, and so forth. The nice thing about this approach? It gives you a foot in the door; it's low pressure; it gives you a chance to begin establishing rapport and a potential relationship with an important inside contact; and most importantly, it gives you a front row seat to potential opportunities! Be on the lookout for needs the employer may have, such as employees who are bogged down with important, yet non-essential tasks; customers not being served efficiently, duties that might be performed in a different way yet still yield excellent outcomes, etc. Perhaps you'll spot ways the employer might serve more customers or improve services, increase the efficient use of resources, time and staff.

Here's an example of what we learned on an informational interview (tour) of a large discount store: the place was a mess, with merchandise strewn all over the place. Cashiers were not available because they had to unload a truck; therefore disgruntled customers were waiting in long lines. We knew a job seeker with a disability who really wanted to work in a store, but people wouldn't encourage his aspiration because they did not think he could operate a cash register. He was strong, very organized and liked to work hard. We introduced him to the store manager and talked about all the things this candidate could do to improve things

Work together to identify contacts and set up informational interviews



in the store. They hired him! His job description includes maintaining the shoe section of the store. He unpacks shoes, puts security sensors on them, places them on the racks, and picks up stray shoes. This allows the cashiers to serve customers – thereby increasing sales. And this job was not advertised. This is a good example of what is known as "customized employment." Google it and you will find a wealth of information.

Showcase the Job Seeker's Talents

Let's say your job seeker has done a profile and has identified some places of employment interest. How will he or she present themselves? The standard method of course is a resume. Make sure it paints a clear and succinct picture and matches what the employer is looking for! Other ways are through demonstrations (live or video recorded), portfolios (artwork, projects that are relevant to the job!), websites and social media, and even "calling cards" (contact information on the front, creative information on the back, for instance "talented artist looking for opportunity in the field of _____").

If your son or daughter is still in high school or going to a college program – or served by an adult agency – team up with the teachers and the employment specialists to do the activities we have covered in these two articles. Work together to identify contacts and set up informational interviews; put your heads together to develop a top-notch positive personal profile; find creative ways to showcase the job seeker's talents. Help him or her to make those valuable connections in the community. Sometimes those opportunities are just around the corner—waiting for the right person!

I invite you to contact me with any questions, comments, and strategies you'd like to share related to the ideas in this article.

Best wishes!

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