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TOOLS FOR
INCLUSION

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Starting with Me: A Guide to Person-Centered Planning for Job Seekers

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Introduction

Work is an important part of life. People with and without disabilities benefit from working. Work can bring financial independence, increased self-confidence, personal growth, skill development, and a better social life.

Perhaps you would like to work, but your family, friends, or support people in your life haven't encouraged you to do so. Maybe you are not certain if you can work or what kind of work might be right for you. This is a guide for you. This guide reviews a three-stage career development process. Career development is an approach to help you make satisfying job choices. One part of career development is person-centered planning.

In person-centered planning, your preferences, goals, and dreams are the focus. A person-centered approach does not mean you have to tackle career development all by yourself. It means that anyone who helps you in your career search respects your wishes and helps you to focus on your skills and abilities.

Career development is an ongoing process. Finding satisfying work doesn't usually just happen by applying for a job in the newspaper or online. The process involves several stages—and it all begins with you.

The Career Development Process

READY?

Start with yourself.

- Who are you? Identify your skills, interests, needs, and goals.

GET SET.

Learn what's out there.

- What type of work is a good fit for you? What is available in your community to help you reach your goals?

GO!

Put your plan into action.

- What steps can you take to find fulfilling work?

READY?

Start with yourself.

To find satisfying work, you need to know your interests, strengths, and preferences. Developing a personal profile can help with this. Your profile is a description of yourself where you answer some questions. What are you good at? What do you enjoy doing? What do you need and want in a job? Here are some specific questions:

What is important to me in a job?

Sample answers: Friendly work environment; help from a supervisor who knows me well; opportunities to learn new skills; located near public transportation; pays well; flexible hours; challenging.

What motivates me to work?

Sample answers: Making money; meeting people; making friends; helping out with a great cause; using my talents and abilities; more independence.

What life experiences have shaped who I am and what I offer as a worker?

Sample answers: Travel or living in different places; classes that changed how I look at the world; community groups I am involved with; unpaid and paid work experiences.

How do I learn best?

Sample answers: In a classroom; one-on-one; having time to read things; talking with someone about a task; doing just one new thing a day; having a routine; being shown how to do the job; meetings with a mentor or supervisor.

What kind of support do I need on the job?

Sample answers: Daily check-ins with supervisor; job coaching; accommodations; assistive technology; help from my coworkers; having a mentor; help with time management or setting priorities.

What kinds of tasks do I want (and not want) to do on my job?

Sample answers: Same routine every day; something different every day; sitting down; standing or moving around; using a computer; working with my hands; working with a team; working on my own.

What is your dream job? Come on, everyone has one—anything goes! What is most appealing about your dream? How can you apply this to your career path?

Sample answer: My dream job is to be the owner of the New England Patriots. I love football and other sports. It would be good to have that much money, and to be popular and famous. I'm also very competitive and like winning. Is there a way to apply that to my job hunt? Well, maybe I can find a job that will let me use my love of sports and healthy competition. Examples: helping to coach a kids' sports team; working at the YMCA; assisting a gym teacher at a local school.

Asking and answering questions like these can be called "doing a self-assessment." When you're doing this, it's important to think about your passions, interests, and talents. Believing in yourself and your abilities is an important starting point.

Self-Assessment Techniques

Take a Closer Look on Your Own

There are many excellent career exploration books, such as "What Color is Your Parachute?" by Richard N. Bolles. There are also interactive software packages and Internet tools to help with your career planning. You can find these resources at your public library, college career center, or local One-Stop Career Center.

One-Stop Career Centers

One-Stop Career Centers are located throughout the United States. The purpose of these centers is to help people find satisfying work. Anyone can join, membership is free, and joining more than one center is okay. You can bring someone with you if you need help using the career center. Take advantage of these resources and activities:

- Listings of jobs in your community
- Computers with Internet access
- Information about different types of careers
- Job-seeker support groups
- Employer events, such as recruiting and job fairs
- Workshops on resume-writing and interviewing
- Computer classes
- Information about training, job fairs, and career workshops in your community

To find One-Stop Career Centers near you, visit www.servicelocator.org or call (877) 872-5627; TTY (877) 889-5627.

Get Some Support from People in Your Life

You may choose to use the help of a personal career team. That's a group of people who know you well and can help you to gather information, both about yourself and about your options.

Other people sometimes can offer a fresh perspective. They may see strengths and talents in you that you had not thought about. They also may have valuable contacts and connections to share.

You choose your team members. You can include family members, friends, former employers and co-workers, neighbors, and professionals such as job coaches. Choose people who believe in you and your ability to reach your goals.

You can get information from team members through one-on-one conversation or through group planning meetings. If you choose to brainstorm with your team in a meeting, it is important to have someone lead the discussion. This person can set guidelines and make sure everyone has a chance to share their ideas. When using a team, it is important that you be the focus. This is your life, your job search, and your future.

Work with a Professional

A vocational rehabilitation counselor or career counselor can help you:

- use assessment tools. These tools can help you identify your likes, dislikes, and preferences. They can also suggest types of jobs and settings which fit you best.
- stay motivated.
- understand where the jobs are today, and what careers have the most potential for the future.
- understand your learning style and accommodation needs.
- get the most from your personal career team. He or she may help with coordination, meeting logistics, or facilitation.

Career counselors can be found at your state Vocational Rehabilitation agency, college or university career-services office, or local One-Stop Career Center. They also may work in private practice in your community. Ask for referrals from others who have used similar services.

Whatever approach you use, the self-assessment step is crucial in your career development, as it gives you a starting point for your job search. Next, it is time to **"GET SET"** and begin to focus on career options that match your skills, needs, and desires.

Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies

Every state has a public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency. These agencies help people with disabilities find employment. In general, VR operates in two ways. The agencies provide direct services, such as career counseling, planning, and assessment. VR also often funds other organizations to provide more intensive services to job seekers, such as job placement or job coaching. They might also pay for training, school, or college. For more information, or to find your local Vocational Rehabilitation office, search online for "vocational rehabilitation" plus the name of your state. Or look in the government section of your phone book.

GET SET.

Learn what's out there.

Now it's time to explore job options that match your skills, interests, and preferences. What do people who work in your chosen career really do? Which companies have job opportunities?

To answer these questions, you'll have to gather lots of information. This takes work, but it will give you a clearer idea of what is available to you. While this is still an exploratory step, it may lead to a job that you want! So make sure you take the time to do it right.

Do not skip this step! Sometimes job seekers feel they have invested lots of time already in thinking about themselves. They feel ready to start applying for jobs. While it may be tempting to move immediately to the **"GO!"** step, you will be missing out on some good information if you do. Taking the time to learn what's out there can be really helpful:

- Researching a job or career lets you know what to expect.
- You'll learn the best companies to work for.
- Networking with people gives you more chances to find work.
- Gathering information may open options that you never thought were possible.
- You'll find out what salary and benefits come with various careers.
- You'll learn about the necessary skills and training needed for your chosen career.

Jack's Travel-Training Business

Even as a kid, Jack was always fascinated with public transportation. Every summer, when he started a new camp, he learned how to get there on the bus rather than using door-to-door van service. In high school, Jack found an internship at the state Transit Authority. He memorized all the public bus routes in the state.

When Jack graduated, he started his own business as a peer travel trainer. Jack and his family wrote a business plan and got funding from the state to hire a support person, Meredith. More than just a job coach, Meredith is Jack's business partner. She handles the paperwork that needs to go in to the state. Jack helps people become independent and employed by mapping out their routes to work and teaching them to take as many buses as they need. He also makes speeches, serves on committees, and talks to agencies about why transportation is important for people with disabilities.

Jack followed his passions, got the support he needed, did some creative planning—and now he has a successful business of his own!

How to explore...

Networking

Networking means talking to people you know to get ideas that can help you. This can be the key to a faster and more successful search! Start by talking with people who do the kind of work that you are exploring. Tell them about your interests. Ask them for their thoughts and for additional contacts with whom you could speak. You never know who may have useful information. Everyone you know, like, and trust can be part of your network. Here are some examples:

- ***Personal Network*** = family, friends, neighbors, classmates, present and past employers and co-workers.
- ***Professional Network*** = present and past teachers, counselors and service providers, doctors, dentists, accountants, insurance agents, etc.
- ***Community Network*** = anyone else you know who works in your neighborhood, for example, at a bank, grocery store, hair salon, restaurant, gym, or religious organization you go to.

Informational Interviews

One kind of networking is known as an informational interview. This means going to speak with someone who does a job you are interested in. It's an interview to learn more about their career, not to ask for a job.

An informational interview helps you to gain knowledge about the field without the stress of a regular job interview. You can ask questions such as what someone does every day, what skills and training they need, and what they like and dislike about their work. Be sure to ask them for other contacts so you can expand your network. The more people you talk to, the greater your chances of meeting someone who knows someone—who might lead you to a job!

Gaining Experience

There are lots of ways to gain work experience and skills. Volunteering or interning gives you a taste of what it is like to work in a particular environment. Job shadowing allows you to observe someone on his or her job to see if it is a job you would want for yourself. Temporary employment agencies give you the chance to try out different jobs for a limited period of time while getting paid.

If you haven't had much work experience and aren't sure what you want to do, you may want to look for a career exploration program. In this type of program, you can experience work while learning more about your skills, abilities, and interests. You may be able to closely follow a worker on the job, or to try out a specific job you may want. These programs can also help you set up informational interviews, tour work places, and research jobs. You may have the option to work with a job coach, job developer, or employment specialist who can help you find the right job.

Online and In-Person Resources

The Internet, college career centers, and One-Stop Career Centers are great places to get information about the world of work. If you're interested in a company, you can check out its website to learn more about what the company does. Career resource centers have written materials about companies, training opportunities, trends, job openings, and opportunities for networking. They can also connect you to training programs or colleges if you want to learn a specific skill or profession.

Finding a Mentor

Another option is to find a mentor: a person who is more experienced in your area of interest and can give you advice. A mentor can point you toward the best resources for your job hunt. He or she can also give you tips on your job search. You should feel comfortable communicating your hopes, goals, and frustrations to this person. A mentor should be open-minded, honest, and supportive.

GO!

Putting your plan into action.

Now that you have identified what you are looking for and have researched career opportunities, it's time to sell yourself! This means showing potential employers what a valuable and productive person you are.

Your job-search strategy should set you apart from the crowd. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Stay true to your vision and values. Try not to let family, friends, or service providers discourage you or change your goals.
- Be open to new ideas and information. You never know where these may lead you.
- Lots of jobs are never listed—they are found through word of mouth. So talk to your network often.
- Use a wide variety of strategies in your search. Mix it up—talk to your support team, go online, go to a career fair.
- Be realistic. Know what compromises you will and will not make.

So, how do you show employers that you are the best person to meet their needs? Here are some tools and techniques to use:

Create or update your resume and list of references

Your resume lists all the skills that you bring to an employment setting. It shows any work experience—paid or unpaid—that is relevant to the job you're seeking now.

- Always have a few paper copies of your resume handy when you go out networking. You can also ask people if you may email or fax them your resume.
- Ask for feedback on your resume. This is a nice way to connect and involve people in your search.
- Evaluate and revise after three months if you do not get interviews during that time. A job coach or One-Stop Career Center can help you do this.

Do research and change your cover letter for different jobs

Every company and organization is looking for something a little different. It pays to do some research about a company before you apply to work there. Go on their website, talk to people you know who work there, and find out all you can. Then you can use your cover letter to explain how your talents meet the employer's needs. Many people just send out the same letter to every employer. This leads to boring cover letters that employers throw out rather than reading. Your extra efforts will give you an advantage.

Prepare for interviews

- Get a list of commonly used interview questions from the Internet, your career center, or a job coach. Think about how you would answer each question.
- One question you will probably hear in an interview is, "So tell me about yourself!" Be ready to answer this question. To help with this, write and practice a 60-second "commercial" about yourself. Tell people who you are, what you are looking for, and what you have to offer. Practice your "commercial" with a friend until it feels comfortable and natural.

Judy's Story

Judy has severe cerebral palsy, and uses a wheelchair and a communication device. She graduated from college three years ago with a degree in English and experience in theatre arts. She has been unsuccessful in finding any type of employment since then. Although her dream is to be an actor or director, her present career goal is to find a writing or editing job.

Recently, Judy had the chance to participate in a work experience program. Through the program, she got to try out two different work settings at the same company. One job was being a writing assistant, and the other was being a web page assistant.

Next, Judy held a planning session with her employment support team. She brought along letters from former supervisors and teachers talking about her strengths and skills. The letters also gave suggestions of job options and other people to contact. Judy and her job developer used these letters to find many people to talk to about the job hunt. Judy also got a referral for an assistive technology assessment. This helped her get new equipment to improve her productivity and communication.

Judy decided to put together a portfolio to display her background, interests, and samples of her writing. This portfolio made it easier for her to show interviewers her motivation and talents.

Judy is still job hunting. But now she has a long list of creative job ideas and leads to follow up on. With her strong support network and her positive energy, she is feeling much more confident about finding a job she will enjoy and excel at.

- Keep your notes, resumes, etc. in a neat folder. You will feel and appear organized and confident. Remember, first impressions are extremely important.
- Consider whether or not you will talk about your disability. What are the pros and cons of disclosing your disability? Do you have a visible disability? Are there accommodations you will need during the interview process? Would it be better to wait until after the job offer to share information?
- Practice interviewing with your friends, family, or service providers. The more you practice, the easier it will be.
- Get exact directions, including public transportation schedules, before going to an interview. Practice getting there a couple of times before your interview day.
- Get interview clothing. Your job coach or a family member can give you advice about what to wear. A business suit is a good choice for both men and women. Have an outfit clean and ready the night before the interview.
- Send a thank-you note, either on paper or by email, right after your interview. Have someone check your note if you have trouble with spelling or grammar.

Put together a portfolio

Sometimes a resume by itself won't work best for you. Or you may find it hard to express yourself in an interview. A portfolio can help with this. A portfolio is a collection of your work that you can show people at an interview. Assembling a portfolio can be useful in showing what you can accomplish. If you have significant physical barriers, especially with verbal communication, having this portfolio can help you and your interviewer feel more comfortable.

- Use a photo album, three-ring binder or scrapbook.
- Include written answers to typical interview questions.
- Include any materials that demonstrate your talents and skills—publications you wrote; reference letters, awards, and certificates; school transcripts; thank-you letters from colleagues or customers; performance reviews. Keep the focus relevant to your career or job goal.

Career development is often not a straight-line process. There may be periods when you feel stuck or frustrated; or times when your activities twist and turn in directions you were not expecting. For example, you might find yourself going back to an earlier step in the career planning process because your interests have changed during your job search.

This is normal and natural. You may do this process several times, and it doesn't have to go in a straight line from start to finish. Be sure to get support from other job seekers, co-workers, family, friends, and professional helpers as you go along. Set manageable goals and reward yourself for each step you take. Keep networking and stay active at your local One-Stop Career Center. Allow yourself the flexibility to reevaluate your goals.

Congratulations! All your hard work and planning has paid off, and you have found a job. You have taken the time to thank everyone who has helped you along the way. How can you maintain your success and stay satisfied with your new work experience? Keep these tips in mind:

- Ask for whatever assistance you need. Remember to advocate for yourself.
- Get to know others at your job. When co-workers know each other well, they work together better—and sometimes become friends outside the workplace.
- Participate in a committee, event, or special project to show your commitment.
- Keep your personal and professional networks active. You can help others in their job search, and also keep aware of new opportunities for yourself down the road.

RESOURCES

Career Development and Job Search Books:

101 Ways to Power Up Your Job Search. J. Thomas Buck, William R. Matthews, Robert N. Leech. McGraw-Hill, 1997.

The Career Guide for Creative and Unconventional People. Carol Eikleberry, Ph.D. Ten Speed Press, 1995.

What Color is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters & Career-Changers. Richard N. Bolles. Ten Speed Press, updated annually.

Job Search Handbook for People With Disabilities. Dr. Daniel J. Ryan. Jist Publishing, 2004.

Career Exploration Tools Online:

Labor and Workforce Development website for job-seekers in the state of Massachusetts: *http://bit.ly/ZBMyI*

America's Labor Market Information System and America's Career Kit have a number of excellent resources:
America's Career InfoNet (www.acinet.org) offers information on job trends, wages, and national and local labor markets. Start by clicking on "Career Tools."

O*NET Online *(http://online.onetcenter.org/)* is a database that describes a wide variety of occupations, their needed skills, and their earning potential.

O*NET Career Assessment and Exploration Tools:

Interest Profiler. Helps participants identify and learn about broad interest areas most relevant to them.

Work Importance Locator. Helps clarify what an individual finds most important in jobs.

Ability Profiler. An ability assessment developed for counseling and career exploration that measures nine job-relevant abilities.

*Additional information on O*NET tools is available at www.onetcenter.org/product/tools.html*

ICI Publications: *(www.communityinclusion.org)*

One-Stop Centers: A Guide for Job Seekers with Disabilities. Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 10.

Networking: Your Guide to an Effective Job Search. Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 7.

Getting the Most from the Public Vocational Rehabilitation System. Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 19.

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TACE NEW ENGLAND Region 1

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