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2-1-2001

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Recommended Citation

Timmons, Jaimie Ciulla; Schuster, Jennifer; and Moloney, Mairead, "Tools for Inclusion: Stories of Success: Using Networking and Mentoring Relationships in Career Planning for Students with Disabilities and Their Families" (2001). *Tools for Inclusion Series, Institute for Community Inclusion*. 14.
https://scholarworks.umb.edu/ici_toolsforinclusion/14

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Stories of Success: Using Networking and Mentoring Relationships in Career Planning for Students with Disabilities and Their Families

by Jaimie Ciulla Timmons, Jennifer Schuster, & Mairead Moloney

Introduction

For any young adult, finding the first few jobs can be hard to do. Many new job-seekers are unfamiliar with the employment process of locating jobs, filling out applications, and speaking with employers at an interview. Adolescents with disabilities may face additional roadblocks due to lack of knowledge about the job search process, difficulty in understanding and completing forms, or communication challenges that can make interviewing an even more stressful event.

Many students rely on formal mechanisms like newspaper ads or school counselors to explore job options and to locate a job. While these methods can often lead to successful employment, friends, family members, and other personal connections can dramatically expand the opportunities for a young adult seeking a job.

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) conducted a study with high school students with disabilities and their parents/guardians. The 12 students and 10 parents came from four different high schools in Massachusetts that represent a mixture of urban and suburban culture and ethnic diversity. The students represented each high school grade level, and had a wide range of disabilities including learning, cognitive, physical or health-related, sensory, behavioral, and psychiatric.

ICI asked these families to share their experiences in planning for and finding employment. Both students and their parents explained the positive and negative factors that influenced the job search. The findings showed that students with disabilities and their families used their **personal networks** and **mentoring relationships** throughout the career planning process.

This brief will share stories about how students used networking and mentoring to become interested in or learn more about a line of work, or even to find jobs. You will also learn how to identify, build, and use personal networks to help in the job search, as well as strategies for developing mentoring relationships.

What is a personal network?

A personal network is all of the people that a family knows. This includes family members, friends, neighbors, community connections through religious organizations, clubs, local services and stores, and professional or business relationships such as past employers, former co-workers, classmates, teachers, and doctors.

What is networking?

Networking means talking to the people in your personal network to learn about the jobs they have or to find out about where there are job openings. Through networking, you can learn about the different kind of jobs that there are and what jobs you might like to do. It involves telling people about the kind of work that you are looking for and asking about their jobs and employers. These people may then refer you to others, eventually providing opportunities to speak with employers who are hiring.

What is a mentor? What is mentoring?

A mentor is a special person, often older, who provides support and guidance on a variety of life issues. Through their own job experiences, mentors can help provide advice in career development. They can also provide support and encouragement to help you succeed in obtaining a job or making career decisions.

Stories of Success

Many of the students and their parents who were interviewed mentioned using family and friends to develop the students' career goals and/or find employment. Although most likely they were not aware that they were doing it, they were expanding and utilizing their social networks. Examples of how these networks were used include finding and obtaining current jobs, securing future employment, and becoming

familiar with a particular career field through the use of mentoring relationships.

The following case studies are based on the conversations with these students and their parents. Each of these stories illustrates several examples of how personal networks can be used throughout the career planning process. Please note that names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Story 1: Finding jobs through personal connections

Jamal is an 18-year-old junior in high school who was interested in finding employment for the summer and weekends. He has a combination of health-related, sensory, and learning disabilities. He began searching for a job on his own by applying at local

businesses. Although Jamal sometimes had difficulty filling out the applications, he was able to turn to his mother for help with the hard parts.

However, when he put out the applications, he was never called back for a job. Since he was unsuccessful with the typical application process, Jamal decided to ask friends about job opportunities. Jamal is fortunate in that he has a large, close-knit family and a wide circle of friends. Through the youth group at his church, Jamal was able to meet many people. He became friends with a man who owned a campground, and Jamal began calling him to ask if he needed help with the maintenance there. This led to a permanent part-time job where Jamal worked at the campground on weekends. To make some extra money, Jamal also asked his brother, who is a roofer, if he could come to work with him and help out on the job. This led to another job opportunity and more employment experience.

Jamal was also introduced to a new field through a personal contact who became a mentor to him.

Jamal knew that he would like a career that involved helping people, but had not considered firefighting until he talked with another friend that he met through his church. His friend was a firefighter, and Jamal thought that his job

sounded exciting and that he would like to do that in the future. Although Jamal thinks it will be difficult to pursue that career because of the classes, testing, and paperwork that he will need to go through, his friend (and mentor) will help

him to prepare for the necessary training by tutoring him and helping him learn the material.

Jamal's story shows several helpful uses of social networks:

- > Getting help to overcome barriers in the job search process (filling out job applications).
- > Using personal connections to help find employment (friends from church to work at the campground, family members to work in roofing).
- > Gaining information about a new career from a mentor (learning about firefighting from a friend).
- > Finding information and resources to help work towards a career goal (getting the necessary materials to learn about firefighting).

"All of the jobs he has gotten have been through friends."

—Jamal's mother

Story 2: Exploring Careers

Sarah is a 17-year-old junior in high school with a psychiatric disability who hopes to turn her personal talents into future careers. Her interests include taking care of children and woodworking. She is already working as a babysitter for her neighbor, a job that she got through her ongoing relationship with the neighbor. Sarah's experience from this job could be the first step on a career path; she is considering working in a day care setting someday.

In the future, Sarah would also like to be a carpenter and build houses. She has a personal connection to the field because her uncle is a roofer. She hopes that he will be able to connect her with a professional carpenter so that she can work as an

"I'm hoping that someone in the family can get her connected."

—Sarah's mother

apprentice and pursue her future career interests. Sarah also has explored her interest in woodworking through a local YMCA program that she learned about through another neighbor. There she developed her skills by making shelves and chairs. Sarah was offered a chance to use both of her interests when someone she met at the YMCA offered her a job doing crafts with children there.

Sarah's story illustrates examples of how to use personal networks to:

- > Find a job while still in school (working as a babysitter for her neighbor).
- > Get connected with professionals in a career field of interest (finding professional carpenters to work with through her uncle).
- > Find a job for the future (working for the YMCA through a contact there).

Story 3: Power of a Mentor

Maria is an 18-year-old senior in high school whose friends and family played a major role in her career activities. She has a combination of physical and learning disabilities. When she was looking for a summer job, Maria turned to a family friend who worked in landscaping to get a job in his business. Maria was also exposed to her long-term career interests through another family member who served as a special mentor in her life. Maria has had a passion for auto body since her brother introduced her to the field when she was ten years old. By letting her work on his car, Maria's brother exposed her to a career that she might never have otherwise considered. This led Maria to take classes in auto body at school to gain

"He had me work on his car when I was younger, and I just loved doing it."

—Maria

more experience. Maria frequently talks to her family about her career goals. Her father proved to be another mentor by helping her to apply to a school for auto body that he himself had attended, helping her to move one step closer to reaching her career goal.

In Maria's story, personal connections were used to:

- > Find and secure current employment opportunities (getting the landscaping job through a family connection).
- > Learn about an unfamiliar career option (becoming introduced to auto body through her brother).
- > Get help in taking necessary steps to reach a career goal (applying to school to learn about auto body).

What can you and your family do?

These stories show how useful personal networks and mentoring relationships can be in finding jobs and planning careers. Therefore, it is important that you and your family learn how to identify and expand your personal networks and use them in the job search process. Having a larger social network may also give you a chance to find someone who could serve as a mentor in the future and provide opportunities to develop mentoring relationships throughout your career. There are a variety of ways to examine and build your network:

Identify your current network:

- > Use the included *Worksheet #1: Identifying Your Network and Mentors* to make a list of everyone you know, not just people who can hire you. This list should consist of people you know well enough to have a conversation with. Include family, friends, neighbors, counselors and other professionals, past and present teachers, co-workers, and employers.

Build your personal network:

- > Go on a few informational interviews. The goal of this type of interview is to learn about a type of job or a certain company, not to get a job. Informational interviews are an excellent way to explore different interests and jobs while making new contacts. People in your network can help you set up interviews where they work.
- > Join different community groups such as local neighborhood organizations, clubs, religious organizations, or recreational facilities.
- > Volunteer for a cause you believe in, or an activity that interests you.
- > Participate in community events, such as those sponsored by local groups, schools, and libraries.
- > Focus on developing relationships. Establish trust. Spend time doing this before you make specific requests of people.

Use your network:

- > Let everyone in your current network know that you are looking for a job and what your interests are. Use *the Phone script for calling network members* to help you talk with the members of your network about your job interests and employment possibilities.
- > Record important information for every contact or lead you have using *Worksheet #2: Contact Sheet for Using and Building Networks*. Make a photocopy for every network member you have identified and create a workbook as you set out on your job search.
- > Ask each person in your network to introduce you, or refer you, to people in their networks. Document each referral that you receive on your worksheets.
- > Tell these people that you want to talk to others who do this type of work. Use your worksheet to guide you through your conversations.
- > Give your resume, if you have one, out to everyone.
- > Ask your contacts if they know of companies that are hiring or opportunities in your field.
- > Invite a group of people from your network together to brainstorm about job possibilities. This is something an employment specialist or counselor can help you to organize.
- > Follow up with contacts with a personal thank you note. It is important to maintain connections even if nothing comes from the contact right away.
- > Ask more than once. Follow up regularly with members for your network as long as you are still looking for a job.
- > Keep your network updated on your progress.

Join with the school as you work to identify, build, and use your personal networks. Ask school personnel to help you to:

- > Map out your networks and develop action plans with you.
- > Think of additional strategies in reaching out to your network.
- > Provide support and encouragement in using your network.
- > Link your family up with both parent and student peer organizations to help build supports.
- > Create linkages with local school-to-work partnerships as a way to connect you with opportunities in local businesses. These partnerships are programs within the school that provide students with real-life work experiences. School-to-work activities provide a rich resource for career exploration and employment experience while building community connections and social networks.

Remember that school personnel should always listen to you, provide you with choices, and empower you. School personnel should never make decisions for you or your family. You are your best advocate!

The following may be helpful in developing career mentoring relationships

A Mentor is:

- > A trusted friend.
- > Often older, so they can share their life experience and provide guidance.
- > Sometimes a person in your own peer group who just has more experience in an area you would like to learn about.
- > Someone who can offer encouragement when you need it.
- > Someone who can help identify good approaches to the job search or to issues on the job.

A Mentor is Not:

- > Someone you feel the least bit uncomfortable with.
- > A person who puts you down or makes you feel like you are not capable.
- > Someone who can't make time in their schedule for you.

Identify your current Mentor possibilities:

- > Using *Worksheet #1: Identifying Your Network and Mentors*, put a star on your networking list next to people with whom you feel especially close. Again, this can be a friend, a neighbor, co-worker, employer, teacher (past or present) or counselor.
- > Identify which of these people you can trust, and whom you would be comfortable asking for advice and help.
- > Identify which of these people has a job or an interest that you want to learn more about.

Build your Mentor relationship(s):

- > Set up a lunch date to discuss your job search ideas.
- > Ask them to tell you about their jobs and career experiences.
- > Go to work with them to get a clearer picture of what a day is like at their workplace.
- > Ask them to help you write your resume.
- > Talk to them about being a reference for you.
- > Keep them posted about developments in your career.
- > Thank them when they offer you their time or assistance.

Use your Mentor relationship(s) to:

- > Help you find jobs you are interested in.
- > Practice interviewing skills.
- > Give your resume to people they know who might be able to give you a job.
- > Identify contacts who can provide informational interviews, tours of their businesses, or opportunities to join them at their jobs.
- > Get advice on a variety of issues. Ask how your mentor was able to resolve similar struggles.
- > Build up your self-confidence.

Conclusion

As you and your family begin the task of finding a job, remember to consider the people in your personal network as important resources. The people you know may be the key to finding a first job or developing personal interests into a career. Remember that building relationships can take time, but stay positive and hopeful.

There is a job out there for you!

Worksheet #1

Identifying your Network and Mentors

Family
School Connections (teachers, classmates, etc.)
Clubs or Groups (after school activities, sports, gyms, etc.)
Friends and Neighbors
Work or Volunteer Contacts (former and present)

Phone script for calling network members

1. Who are you calling?

How are you going to address this person? (Mr., Mrs., Dr., first name)

2. How did you get the contact?

Who gave you their name and phone number?

3. What are you going to say when they answer their phone?

Hello. How are you today?

_____ gave me your name and suggested that I call you.

Is this a good time to talk?

4. What kind of job are you looking for?

Be as specific as possible.

If you do not have a specific job in mind, be able to talk about a career that you think you want to learn more about.

5. What are your skills and strengths?

What jobs have you had?

What are you good at?

6. What are you going to ask them for help with?

Can I talk with you about your job or company?

I was wondering if you could give me feedback on my resume?

Could I get a tour of your office/company?

Do you know anyone else I could talk to?

Can you offer me advice on my job search?

7. What do you say when you end the conversation?

Thank you!

Worksheet #2

Contact Sheet for Using and Building Networks

Make a photocopy for every network member you have identified.

Contact Information

name

phone number/fax

email

street address

city, state, zip

how known

employer

job or position

Could you recommend any people who might be helpful for me to talk with about my career goals?

name, job, employer, phone number

May I tell these people that you have suggested that I speak with them?

yes

no

www.childrenshospital.org/ici

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the families, young adults, and school personnel that participated in this project. This brief also reflects the contributions of many staff members of the Institute for Community Inclusion, especially John Butterworth, Sheila Lynch Fesko, and Cecilia Gandolfo. We would also like to thank the external editors, Dick Brophy, Joyce Lehrer, Paul Rowe, and Lisa Williams, for their valuable input.



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This is a publication of the Center on State Systems and Employment (RRTC) at the Institute for Community Inclusion/UAP (#H133B980037), which is funded, in part, by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) of the US Department of Education. This publication was also supported by grant #HO23D970306. The opinions contained in this publication are those of the grantees and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Department of Education.



Other ICI publications on this topic

Tools for Inclusion Series

An Examination of Teaching a Networking Strategy to Job Seekers (*January 1999, Vol. 7, No.1*)

Networking: A Consumer Guide to an Effective Job Search (*August 1998, Vol. 6, No. 3*)

Manual

Building Community Connections: Designing a Future that Works is a training curriculum that offers detailed, yet easy-to-follow suggestions for improving your community networking skills in the job search. Although geared more towards trainers, the manual's easy-to-use format makes it useful for all audiences.

Message Board

The Massachusetts Partnership for Transition (MPT) is a statewide coordinating council that brings together projects, resources, and activities aimed at supporting the transition of all youth. This organization moderates a Web-based message board to assist schools and families in learning about and working with issues related to transition.

These products and the message board are available via the ICI web site at www.childrenshospital.org/ici

This publication will be made available in alternate formats upon request.