

Whose Job Is It?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Many people exert tremendous energy to “get jobs” for people with disabilities. Between government entities, non-profit organizations, service providers, etc., thousands work diligently in the field of vocational-rehabilitation, employment services, etc., for individuals with disabilities. It’s seemingly a noble effort (considering the on-going, dismal unemployment rate of people with disabilities). But it’s a strategy that can be terribly counterproductive, resulting in unintentional barriers to successful employment. When we try to secure employment “for” a person with a disability, we may inadvertently make the person with a disability appear to be incompetent in the eyes of a potential employer. The employer’s thinking might be: “If the person needs someone to find a job *for* him, he must not be very competent, so do I really want him working for me?”

In addition, doesn’t this practice send a similar message to the person with a disability, as in: “You have a disability and are therefore not able to get your own job, so I’ll need to do it for you.” Do we really want to reinforce this negative, harmful attitude in the people we say we’re trying to help?

Like many other practices in Disability World, this one is so common that we seldom question its validity or effectiveness. Parents routinely attempt to “find a job” for a son or daughter with a disability, special ed personnel do the same for students with disabilities, and a variety of professionals follow suit for adults with disabilities.

But if we look at a similar practice in the Real World, our common sense may kick in. What would happen if “Mary,” for example, called or visited a potential employer to inquire about employment for her husband, her friend, or her teenager (none

of whom have a disability)? The employer’s reaction would probably be something like, “Hmmm, this person must be a real dud if his wife [or friend or mother] is here on his behalf. I sure don’t want him working here!”

In the Real World, Mary would *never* consider doing such a thing, but it’s usually the “norm” for people with disabilities. Why? It seems that this practice is rooted in the antiquated and mythical belief that people who happen to have disabilities are inherently incompetent to get their own jobs. (Several articles on the “Presumption of Incompetence” mentality can be found at www.disabilityisnatural.com.)

This practice also has its roots in the Entitlement Mentality. Through various laws and social policies, people with disabilities may be entitled to employment assistance. Thus, many, if not most, routinely “get in line” or get on a waiting list for employment services because they’re entitled. Many spend years waiting, without ever taking any personal actions or responsibility to try to get jobs on their own. They think, “Why should I take the initiative—I’m entitled to professional help.”

The long-term solution is to ensure children with disabilities receive an appropriate, academic education in general education classrooms, so they can successfully move into post-secondary education, employment, and/or both. After high school, they can attend regular college classes, enroll as an “audit” student (in which no credits are earned, but learning still takes place), attend regular vocational programs, and/or participate in other learning opportunities. We also need to make sure that children with disabilities are included in ordinary, age-appropriate community, religious, recreational, and/or other activities. They need the social and emotional growth that can be

You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.

Abraham Lincoln

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learned only in inclusive environments. (In “special,” segregated settings, children learn how to be successful only in other “special,” segregated environments.)

In the short-term—right now—we need to help teens and adults with disabilities learn *how to get their own jobs!* They need to learn the strategies and skills that are routinely used by people *without* disabilities in securing employment, such as:

- Using personal networking, Internet sites, want-ads, a state’s employment services (again, the one used by people who do not have disabilities), etc., for finding work;
- How to make phone calls and set up interviews;
- Effective job interview methods, how to dress for success, filling out applications, etc.

We can help people learn these skills via direct instruction, through role-playing, letting the person tag along with someone else on a job hunt, and, of course, by encouraging the person to “just do it” (apply for a job) so he can learn from experience! And we need to value those experiences in which the person is not successful (and help the person also see their value), for with each experience, the person has learned what *not* to do, and what to do better the next time. Embracing the concepts of “dignity of risk” and “permission to fail” can open up a world of new possibilities.

We could also ask professional employment counselors (non-disability related) or business people (including retirees) to volunteer as a coach for a person with a disability. The expertise of those outside the disability arena can enable the person with a disability and *us* to move beyond Disability World paradigms and embrace Real World successful strategies.

Many people with disabilities have learned that getting one’s foot in the door can be difficult

because of continued prejudice based on disability. Thus, they’ve learned to make the initial contact by submitting their resumes/applications through the mail, online, or some other way that’s not face-to-face. If the employer is familiar with the person’s qualifications *first*, the presence of the disability becomes less important. Of course, this isn’t the way it *should* be, but it’s the reality for many, so we need to recognize these barriers and use strategies to get beyond them.

We need to have higher expectations for people with disabilities. We need to expect that a teen with a disability can and should get her first job on her own. We need to expect that adults with disabilities are capable of deciding what types of jobs they want, and are capable of getting those jobs. And we need to explore the wonderful possibilities of self-employment, too.

This kind of transformation in our thinking may, at first, seem “not realistic” or “too radical.” But, in reality, isn’t it common sense? Shouldn’t we have the same expectations for people with disabilities that we have for people *without* disabilities? Shouldn’t people with disabilities also use the successful strategies used by people without disabilities? In addition, consider the following ancient proverb from Lao Tzu that may be familiar to you: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

When we help people with disabilities learn to get their own jobs, we’re helping them move away from a lifetime sentence of helplessness, dependency, and segregation, toward a lifetime of opportunities for greater self-sufficiency, self-direction, and inclusion. And when we actively demonstrate our belief in them—specifically, our belief in their ability to get their own jobs—they’ll learn to believe in themselves. Isn’t that the type of employment assistance they *really* need?

Good education means learning to read, write, and most importantly, learn how to learn, so that you can be whatever you want to be when you grow up.

Patty Murray