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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 disabilities benefit from working as much as or more than people without disabilities do. The benefits from work include financial independence and security; increased self-confidence; personal growth; skill development; and a better social life. Perhaps you would like to work but have not been encouraged to do so by your family, friends, or support people in your life. 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.

In person-centered career planning, your personal preferences, goals, and dreams are the focus. A person-centered approach does not mean you have to tackle job exploration all on your own. It does mean that anyone who helps you in your career search and the development of your career dreams 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. The process involves several phases—and it all begins with you.

The three-stage career development process

- 1. READY?**
Start with yourself.
Who are you? Explore and identify your skills, interests, needs, and dreams.
- 2. GET SET.**
Learn what's out there.
What type of work fits with your personal profile? What is available in your community to help you reach your goals?
- 3. GO!**
Put your plan into action.
What steps can you take to get the right job for you?

1. READY? ***Start with yourself.***

In order to find satisfying work, you need to start with yourself. Develop a personal profile, a self-assessment. What are your interests, strengths, preferences, and dreams? What do you need and want in a job? As you continue reading, pay attention to your particular interests, your likes and your dislikes. Figuring out what you don't want to do can be just as important as knowing what you want. Questions to ask yourself include:

- ***What is important to me in a job?***

Environment, amount and style of supervision, opportunities to learn, work culture, geographic location, wages and benefits, opportunities to advance, independence, respect, how the job is set up.



• **What motivates me to work?**

Money, meeting people, making friends, seeing the results of my work, working for a cause, using my talents and abilities, independence.

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

Travel or living in different places, projects or classes from school, community activities or groups I am involved with, volunteer or other work experiences, hobbies, close personal relationships, knowledge and expertise, roles and experiences in my family.

• **How do I learn best?**

In a classroom, one-on-one, using verbal or written instruction, in small doses, being shown how to do the job, supervisory meetings, with a mentor.

• **What kind of support do I need on the job?**

Daily check-ins with supervisor, job coaching, accommodations, assistive technology, weekly supervision, peer support, work site mentor, meetings outside of work, help with time management or priority setting.

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

Repetition or variety, sitting down, standing or moving around, teamwork or on my own, physical labor, level of coworker or customer interaction, computer, paperwork, travel.

• **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?**

So you want to be owner of the New England Patriots... Why? Is it the wealth? The power and control? The popularity, fame, and notoriety? The challenge and competition? Your passion for football? Your athletic skill? Your geographic loyalty and pride?

Although self-assessment involves reviewing your skills and experiences, it is much more than that—you are also recognizing your dreams. Your dreams can drive your planning. Believing in yourself and your abilities is always the starting point.

Self-Assessment Techniques

There are various methods of self-assessment:

If you prefer to...

...take a closer look on your own:

There are many excellent career exploration books that include self-evaluation exercises. One is *What Color is Your Parachute* by Richard Nelson Bolles. There are also interactive computer software packages and internet tools available that are simple to use and can increase awareness while matching your skills and interests to potential employment options. These resources are generally available for purchase, or you can find them 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 U.S. and offer a variety of career development and job search services to the general public.

Membership is free, and joining more than one center is okay. Centers are required to meet the needs of all job seekers who want to use them. You can bring someone with you if you need help using the center. Check in regularly and take advantage of ongoing resources and activities:

- Job postings
- Computer stations with connections to the internet
- Information about different types of employment opportunities and careers
- Job seeker support groups
- Employer events such as on-site recruiting and job fairs
- Job-seeking skills workshops on topics like resume writing and interviewing
- Community information about training, job fairs, and career seminars

To find out the location of One-Stop Centers in your area, contact America's Service Locator online at www.servicelocator.org or by phone at (877) 872-5627; TTY (877) 889-5627.

If you prefer to...***... get some support from people in your life:***

You may choose to use the help of a personal career team - a team 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. For example, there may be other aspects in your life, such as a passion for gourmet cooking, that involve transferable skills useful in a variety of jobs. They also may have valuable contacts and connections to share. You choose your team members. Consider including family, friends, past employers, past or present co-workers, neighbors, professionals, and service providers. The most important qualification for a team member is that he/she believes 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 meeting(s). If you choose to brainstorm with your team in a meeting, it is important to have someone to facilitate the discussion. This person can set guidelines and make sure everyone has a chance to share their ideas and suggestions. When using a team, it is important that you be the focus. This is your life, your job search, and your dream.

If you prefer to...***... work with a professional:***

A vocational rehabilitation counselor or career counselor can provide guidance in your career development. He or she can:

- ◆ suggest and administer assessment tools used to help you identify your likes, dislikes, and preferences and to suggest types of jobs and settings which these characteristics might best fit. These can often lead to a new level of self-awareness and open up new avenues for career exploration.
- ◆ help you to stay motivated.
- ◆ provide information about labor market trends.
- ◆ help you to explore issues relating to your learning style and accommodation needs.
- ◆ help you use a personal career team to its fullest, perhaps helping with coordination, meeting logistics, or facilitation.

Career counselors can be found in a number of settings—at your state Vocational Rehabilitation agency, college or university career services office, local One-Stop Career Center, or practicing privately 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 uniquely match you.

Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies

Each state in the U.S. has a public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency. These agencies provide assistance to eligible persons with disabilities in meeting their employment goals. In general, VR operates in two ways. They provide services directly to individuals, such as career counseling, planning, and assessment. VR also often funds other community organizations and private contractors 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, go to www.nchrtn.okstate.edu/pages/state_vr.html or consult the government section of your phone book.

Jack's Dream

Even as a kid, Jack was always fascinated with transportation. Every summer, when he started a new summer camp, he learned how to get there and back on the public bus rather than using door-to-door van service. In high school, he found and enjoyed a four-month internship at the state Transit Authority. He memorized all the public bus routes in the state. When it came time to find full-time employment, there were no positions available at the Transit Authority. Instead of settling for something less, Jack went out on his own: he started his own business as a peer travel trainer. Jack and his family wrote a combined person-centered and business plan to make it happen. With funding from the state, Jack hired a person to support him on the job. More than just a job coach, Meredith is a co-partner in the business. Their skills complement each other perfectly. Jack helps people become independent and employed by mapping out their route to work and teaching them to take as many buses as they need. He also markets his business by making speeches and serving on transportation committees. Meredith handles the paperwork that needs to go in to the state. This year, Jack is expanding his business to provide consulting to state and private agencies about why his passion- transportation- is important for people with disabilities. Jack followed his dream, and supported by creative and flexible planning, he now has a successful business of his own!

2.

GET SET. *Learn what's out there.*

You have created a personal profile through starting with yourself; now it's time to explore possibilities that match your skills, interests, and preferences. What do people who work at your dream job really do on a daily basis? Which companies have opportunities?

Now is the time to gather lots of information in a variety of different ways to get a clear and complete idea of what is available to you. While this is still an exploratory step, it may lead to contact with a job that you want. Remember to always put your best foot forward!

Do not skip this step! Sometimes job seekers feel they have invested lots of time already in thinking about themselves and so the next step is to get a job. While it may be tempting to move immediately to the **"Go!"** step, you will be shortchanging yourself if you do. In fact, taking the time to learn what's out there helps you lay groundwork that can assist you in many ways:

- Researching the job lets you know what to expect.
- You identify the best companies to work for.
- Networking with people builds your reputation and opportunities.
- Gathering information may open options that you may not have thought possible before.
- You can better negotiate offers by finding out what salary and benefits come with various careers.
- You learn about the necessary qualifications and aptitudes in your chosen field, information you need to plan a successful marketing strategy.

How to explore...

Networking

Networking simply means talking to people you know to get ideas or make connections that could help you. The saying "it's not what you know, it's who you know" can be the key to a faster and more successful search! Start by talking with people who may be in a field related to the kind of work that you are exploring. Tell them about your interests. Ask them for their thoughts or for additional contacts with whom you could speak. You never know who may have useful information that can lead to opportunities. Be sure and consider everyone you come into contact with in your daily routines:

- **Personal Network** = family, friends, neighbors, classmates, present and past employers and co-workers.
- **Professional Network** = present and past teachers, counselors and human service providers, doctors, dentists, accountants, insurance agents, etc.
- **Community Network** = other services you use such as your bank; food, video, or drug stores; day care or schools; hair salon; restaurants; health club / gym; associations you belong to; church or synagogue.

Informational Interviews

One specific kind of networking is known as an informational interview. The informational interview allows you to gain knowledge about the field without the stress of a regular job interview. You can ask questions such as what does someone do on a daily basis, what are the requirements of the job, and what are the trends in the field. Be sure to request other contacts so you can expand your network. By doing this, you will eventually get names of employers where you might get additional informational interviews, job interviews, and connections that could ultimately lead to a job!

Experience

There are lots of ways to gain work experience and skills. Volunteering or interning gives you a taste of what it is actually 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 for your work.

Perhaps you have not yet had many work experiences and are unsure of what you would like to do or what kind of job you could get. You may want to find out whether there is a career exploration program in your area. In this type of program, you

can experience work in actual places of employment where you can learn more about your skills, abilities, and interests. You may be able to spend time closely following a worker on the job, or try out the specific job you think you may want. These programs often have a job search component as well, which involves going on informational interviews, touring work places, and researching information about jobs available in your community. You may have the option to work with a Job Coach, Job Developer, or Employment Specialist who can assist you in finding the job that is right for you.

Informational Resources

The internet and career resource centers such as college career centers and public One-Stop Career Centers are great places to get a lot of information about the world of work. Almost every company has its own website these days, where you can learn about the company and what it does. Career resource centers have written materials about companies, training opportunities, trends, actual 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.

Mentor

Another way to widen your perspective on career options 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 in the direction of further resources, and guide you in career options and strategy. You should feel comfortable communicating your hopes, dreams, and frustrations to this person. A mentor should be open-minded, supportive, and non-judgmental.

3.

GO!

Putting your plan into action.

Now that you have identified what you are looking for and have researched career areas and opportunities in your community, it is time to sell yourself and shine as the valuable and productive person that you are.

Your job search strategy should be as individual and distinctive as you are. Here are some general tips to keep in mind:

- Stay true to your vision and values. Try not to let well-intentioned 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.
- Use a variety of techniques in your job search. Your perfect opportunity may not be openly advertised. Internal employee referral is being used more and more as a hiring practice. Direct face-to-face contact can be more effective than phone inquiries—employers see you and are more likely to be receptive and to engage in conversation.
- Be realistic. Know what compromises you will and will not make.

You will need to gather tools and develop your marketing strategy. Your goal is to show employers that you are the best person to meet their needs.

Create or update your resume and list of references

Creating your resume requires you to list all the skills that you bring to an employment setting. This is a good way to begin your job search.

- Always have copies handy to share with lots of people.
- Ask for feedback. This is a nice way to connect and involve people in your search.
- Keep your references current, and prepare them for calls they may be receiving from prospective employers.
- Evaluate and revise after three months if you do not get interviews during that time.

Use market research

Seek out company information to customize your cover letters, conversations and interviews. Do not send out the same cover letter to everyone. Your extra efforts could give you an advantage over other applicants.

Prepare for interviews and networking meetings

- Get a list of commonly used interview questions from the internet, your career center or service provider. Think through and record your answers.

- “So tell me about yourself?” Compose and practice a “sixty-second commercial” to tell people who you are, what you are looking for and what you have to offer.
- Keep your notes, resumes, etc. in a neat folder. You will feel and appear organized and confident. Remember, first impressions are extremely important.
- Consider how, if at all, might you 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?
- Keep it positive. Practice interviewing with your friends, family, or service providers.
- Get exact directions, including public transportation schedules, if you are at all unsure of the meeting location. Do trial runs if needed.
- Get appropriate interview clothing. Have an outfit clean and ready the night before the interview.
- Keep your supply of thank-you notes stocked and available. Always follow up meetings, including informational interviews, with a prompt thank-you note. Have your note reviewed if you have trouble with spelling or grammar.

Compile a portfolio

Sometimes a traditional resume alone does not suit your situation, or you may have additional information that you want to present. Assembling a portfolio can be useful in achieving that special touch. If you have significant physical barriers, especially with verbal communication, having this product in hand can help you, and your interviewer, feel more comfortable. It is true that at times, “pictures speak louder than words.”

- Use a photo album, three-ring binder or scrapbook.
- Include written answers to typical interview questions, a more thorough version of your “sixty-second commercial.”
- Include any materials that demonstrate your talents and skills — publications you wrote; other compositions, reference letters, awards and/or 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. You might find yourself cycling back to earlier steps as you continue to learn more. For example, after you begin to **“Learn what’s out there,”** you may realize that you want to revisit **“Start with yourself”** because there were some elements you missed or because your interests have changed or developed. 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 space and flexibility to feel your way through and reevaluate your goals as necessary.

Congratulations! All your hard work and planning has paid off! You have found your job, and you have settled in quite nicely. You have taken the time to thank everyone who has helped you along the way. Share your experiences—you may be surprised at how much you have learned and what you can offer to others.

Your attention now shifts to doing the best job that you can. How can you maintain your success and get maximum satisfaction from your new employment experience? Keep the following in mind as you make the most of your new opportunity:

- Ask for whatever assistance you need.
- Get to know others at your job—possibly make a new friend... or two.
- Get yourself known in your workplace—participate in a committee or event.
- Show initiative and motivation—offer ideas or take on a special project.
- Advocate for your professional development interests.
- Keep your personal and professional networks active—career advancement may be in your future.

RESOURCES

Judy's Story

Judy has severe cerebral palsy, and uses a wheelchair as well as a communication device. She graduated from college three years ago with a degree in English along with studies 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.

She came across the opportunity to participate in a work experience program where she got to try out two different work settings: one as a Writing Assistant in the Public Affairs Department and the other as a Project Web Page Assistant with another department at the company.

Organized by her new employment support team, Judy held a person-centered career planning session with her job developer, vocational rehabilitation counselor, work experience supervisor, family, and personal care attendant. She took full advantage of this session by also gathering letters from past fieldwork supervisors and teachers expressing their impressions of her strengths and skills along with suggestions of potential job options and specific contacts and resources to consider. Judy and her job developer followed up with this network and were referred to many additional people to talk with. Her planning process also resulted in a referral for an assistive technology assessment to help her obtain updated equipment to improve her productivity and communication at work.

She decided to put together a portfolio to display her background, interests, and samples of her writing. This was a great tool for Judy that served as a "bridge" to engage an interviewer while clearly presenting her motivation, talents and capabilities.

Judy now has a very long list of creative job ideas and leads to work from. Given Judy's positive energy, along with her new direction and support network, it is just a matter of time before she finds the job she wants!

Career Development and Job Search Books:

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

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

What Color is Your Parachute: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters & Career-Changers. *Richard N. Bolles, 2002, Ten Speed Press (updated yearly).*

Job Search Handbook For People With Disabilities. *Dr. Daniel J. Ryan, 2000, Jist Publishing.*

Assessment and Career Exploration Tools:

America's Labor Market Information System and America's Career Kit have a number of excellent resources:

America's Career InfoNet (www.acinet.org), which includes a wealth of information on job trends, wages and national and local labor markets.

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

O*NET Career Assessment and Exploration Tools, which include:

Interest Profiler. A self-assessment career exploration tool, where participants identify and learn about broad interest areas most relevant to their related interests.

Work Importance Locator. A self-assessment career exploration tool that 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: (available at www.communityinclusion.org)

One-Stop Centers: A Guide for Job Seekers with Disabilities. Tools for Inclusion, November 2000. Order #TO10

Networking: A Consumer Guide to an Effective Job Search. Tools for Inclusion, January 1999. Order #TO7

Stories of Success: Using Networking and Mentoring Relationships in Career Planning for Students with Disabilities and their Families. Tools for Inclusion, February 2001. Order #TO12

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