The Power of a Job

Do you remember your first job? Early work experience gained through a first job can be powerful, especially when young adults are still in their formative years. First jobs teach important life lessons: Success begins with showing up every day, on time, ready to do your part. They teach that there will be some tasks you enjoy and others you dread. They teach you to adapt to the established rules and the unspoken norms of the workplace. And they teach you where you fall in the pecking order—and that where you fall means that many days you go home from your shift feeling humbled and gritty. But these first jobs also instill a sense of pride from overcoming setbacks, accomplishing goals, and earning a paycheck. First jobs teach you that hard work builds your character, your identity, and your self-confidence.

For young people with disabilities, a first job can be especially transformational. Entering college after high school, so often a rite of passage for young adults, is not always a realistic option for those with disabilities, particularly those with learning and intellectual
disabilities. Information processing deficits pose considerable challenges to mastering the academic rigor of higher education. College is not for everyone, and for youth with disabilities, employment often emerges as the most logical post-secondary option. For many at this age, however, even those without disabilities, employment may seem to be an elusive and daunting prospect. Too often, youth may not know what kinds of jobs to look for, where to apply, or how to interview. To guide them on the path from school to work, young adults need mentors and advocates who can help them break down barriers to employment. Youth, particularly those with disabilities, often find the transition from public school entitlement programs to the world of work to be a rude awakening.

The innumerable services afforded in public school special education programs may not translate into the competitive working world. Despite more than 25 years since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, business and industry is no more inclined to recruit, hire, accommodate, and assimilate persons with disabilities. For this reason, youth with disabilities and the employers who hire them need the intensive pre-employment training and the ongoing post-employment support for which Bridges From School to Work (Bridges) has earned a national reputation.

For more than 25 years, Bridges has set the standard for school-to-work transition services for both in-school and out-of-school youth with disabilities. Bridges collaborates with school systems, vocational rehabilitation programs, and workforce development agencies to help youth prepare for jobs, get jobs, and keep jobs. But Bridges does far more. It fosters long-term job retention for youth in competitive, integrated employment by providing one year of post-hire monitoring, follow-up, and support. The program serves a dual purpose: to meet the needs of youth with disabilities and the businesses who hire them. Bridges matches businesses with job-ready young adults whose skills, aptitudes, and abilities are ideal for their entry-level opportunities.

This proven approach affords youth a brighter future and provides funders a solid return on investment.
What’s more, jobs for youth pump wages and taxes into the local community, enhancing the economic vitality of the cities where Bridges operates.

Achieving job placement and retention outcomes for youth with significant employment barriers requires specialized personnel: committed, qualified, compassionate professionals with business acumen who believe in the transformational power of a job for youth with disabilities.

Salaries for direct service personnel comprise the majority of the organization’s budget. Unfortunately, there are far more young people with disabilities who need Bridges services than any one funding source can support alone. Financial resources from government agencies, private foundations, and individual donors are needed to help these young people realize their employment dreams, goals, and aspirations.

The Time is Now

Support for Bridges has never been more critical. Each year nearly 400,000 young people with disabilities exit the public school system, but most are left without any concrete plans or supports to help them bridge the gap between high school and employment. Many face socioeconomic challenges that often compound their employment barriers. Most lack the knowledge and self-advocacy skills to navigate a highly bureaucratic adult workforce development and vocational rehabilitation system.

Polls show the majority of young adults with disabilities want to work. However, according to the American Community Survey, only 31% of youth with disabilities (age 16-20) were employed after high school in 2014. Add poverty to the equation, a reality for a majority of Bridges youth, and rates of employment are far lower. And, most Bridges youth are ineligible for the safety net of Supplemental Security Income administered by the Social Security Administration because their non-evident or “invisible” disabilities are not significant enough to qualify them. Yet such invisible disabilities create very real barriers when it comes to post-secondary education and employment. These disabilities typically include specific learning disabilities, attention deficits, and psychosocial disorders. Without targeted interventions from a program like Bridges, these 17-24 year-olds remain in the gap between school and work, joining the ranks of disconnected youth (neither in school nor in the workforce) now numbering in the millions.

“We’re proud to be among the first supporters of this model employment program that empowers young people with disabilities to live productive lives.”

Kevin Webb
Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation
Contributing more than $400,000 to Bridges since 1991.
The economic drain associated with every disconnected youth is estimated at $11,500 per year in lost earnings and taxes. Alternatively, according to a Social Security Administration study published in the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, participants placed in jobs through Bridges have annual earnings that are $4,000 higher at age 25 than their non-Bridges participating peers, and by age 30, the earnings difference increases to more than $6,200 annually. This is because Bridges provides young adults the support, training, and encouragement that helps them steer clear of destructive influences, leading them instead on a path to employment. Research unequivocally demonstrates that paid work experience is a primary predictor of future success and quality of life: Paid, competitive, integrated employment is a key vehicle for achieving long-term employment success, but this can only be achieved with an effective process for transitioning youth with disabilities from school to competitive work. After 25 years and serving 21,000 youth with disabilities, Bridges has perfected the school-to-work transition process.

For a program like Bridges to work, however, the sole focus cannot be on youth alone. Business and industry must also reap benefits. Businesses continue to identify the development of a skilled and committed workforce as one of its key challenges. Noted in recent research, employers who have hired Bridges youth indicated that hiring persons with disabilities as a way of “giving back to the community” is less important than hiring persons who can perform on the job and add value to the business’ bottom line. Bridges couldn’t agree more; Bridges matches local employers with youth who are going to be assets, not liabilities.

An initial investment in Bridges services for young adults with disabilities generates a return on investment for not only donors and funders, but also for the youth, their families, their school districts, and their communities.

**Articles Featuring Bridges**

*Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*:

*Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*:

*Journal of Rehabilitation*:
Goals Achieved, Lives Transformed

Here’s a story of a young man who really wanted to work; not only did he get his first job through Bridges, but he got his first three jobs through Bridges. Zachary Ray clearly benefited from the unique, long-term interventions Bridges offers—interventions that often match young adults with multiple opportunities.

Zachary began working with his Bridges Employer Representative in the summer of 2011. Zachary exhibited genuine desire, unwavering persistence, and abundant optimism from the outset. At the time, Zachary was living in temporary housing with his mother and sister and wanted to help support his family.

Zachary’s Bridges journey took longer than most—job hunting was new to him and the job search process didn’t come easily or naturally. But, he always had the right outlook—he was positive, eager to learn, and incredibly determined. Zachary put in lots of hard work and practice: calling employers to ask about hiring opportunities; polishing his interview skills; and soaking up feedback. With help from Bridges, he filled out many applications and attended numerous interviews, but a job didn’t come right away.

Despite a slow start, Zachary stayed persistent and optimistic. Eventually an opportunity presented itself in July 2012 when he was hired at ProPark as a parking lot traffic director. Though his shift hours were limited, hinging on scheduled sporting events, this gave Zachary a taste of the work world—and a regular paycheck—both of which motivated him to do more to move ahead.

With the help and guidance of Bridges, Zachary kept applying for jobs, and in March 2013 he got a second job with Aramark as a food runner in the Oakland Coliseum restaurant. Then in August 2013, Zachary was hired as a courtesy clerk at Safeway, where he worked for three years as an invaluable member of the team.

Most recently, in March, 2017, Zachary worked with Bridges once again to pursue an opportunity to build upon his existing food and beverage experience. He was offered a position as a Food Runner at P.F. Chang’s, a large and fast-paced restaurant in Emeryville, CA. It should come as no surprise that the hiring manager skipped the final step in the interview process and offered him a job on the spot. At P.F. Chang’s Zachary is earning regular tips and a higher hourly wage than he did in any of his previous jobs. He continues to exhibit the same characteristics that have always proven successful: a willingness to work hard, to go the extra mile, and to pursue personal development. And he does it all with unbounded energy and a winning smile.

With his motivation—and with a little help from Bridges—Zachary is not among the millions of this country’s disconnected youth. Instead, Zachary, like thousands of other Bridges participants, is a prime example of the power of a job in transforming the lives of young adults with disabilities.
Origins of Bridges

J.W. Marriott, the founder of Marriott International, was a firm believer in “abilities.” This meant hiring people for the things they can do, regardless of perceived disabilities, and taking care of employees so they could, in turn, take care of customers. With this strong belief in abilities of all people, the Marriott family established an independent foundation—The Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities (MFPD)—the centerpiece of which became Bridges From School to Work. MFPD is not a corporate foundation but, instead, a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, eligible for government funding, tax-deductible gifts, and awards from grantmaking foundations.

You Can Make a Difference

Your investment in Bridges is backed by more than 25 years of funding from The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation whose support covers core operational costs. Funding for Bridges generated in local communities stays there as MFPD dedicates 100 percent of local support to be used for services that directly impact youth in local Bridges programs.

Each year Bridges helps more than 1,000 young people with disabilities make the transition from high school special education programs to the competitive, adult labor market. Our strategic priority is to serve 1,500 youth annually by 2018 and to expand into new cities around the country, bringing Bridges services to the communities and school districts that need it most.

With your assistance, we can achieve this growth goal. Your support will create employment opportunities for youth, meet the hiring needs of businesses, and improve the economic vitality of communities across the country. Contact Tad Asbury to learn more about how you or your organization’s financial support can help transform the life of a young adult with disabilities through the power of a job.

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