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Role Models and Mentors Help Build Employment Success

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Role Models and Mentors Help Build Employment Success

Young people who are blind or visually impaired often benefit from interactions with role models and mentors who are visually impaired. I can still clearly remember my first encounter with an adult who was legally blind. At the age of 9, I had not thought very much about legal blindness and how it would affect my life. I was attending a camp for children with vision loss one summer, where most of the other children were totally blind. I saw myself as sighted compared to them. I did not read braille or use a white cane, but in some small way, I realized I was connected to their world. One day, we had a scavenger hunt around town. My group was supposed to find out the cost of a menu item at a restaurant with a menu posted on the wall behind the counter. There were about two or three children and one adult in my group. We entered the restaurant, and I turned to the adult in our group and asked him to read the price of the item we needed to find. He answered, "I can't see it either; you'll have to ask." If a light bulb had been over my head, you would have seen it light up. I knew that this adult had some vision loss, but he was like me — no white cane. He seemed to be able to do anything except drive a car. I understood for the first time that I would grow up to be like him. I would not grow out of my visual disability. It was a permanent part of who I was, and the skills I was learning, like asking for assistance, would be my way of coping.

Later on, I experimented with hiding my disability and refusing accommodations. Sometimes this caused some very uncomfortable situations, but other times it worked out with seemingly no problems. Having a mentor at this point would have facilitated conversations about these experiences and helped me balance my desire to fit in and my need to disclose.

Four years ago, when I joined the National Research and Training Center (NRTC) on Blindness and Low Vision and learned about the mentoring project, I was excited to see how this program might help college students have a smoother path to successful employment. Looking back on my own experience, transitioning from college to my first professional job without a mentor probably

took longer than necessary, and I missed opportunities because I was figuring it out on my own. As a new college graduate in social work applying for my first professional job, I did not give any forethought to disability disclosure, another important issue faced by job seekers with visual impairment. My previous, non-professional jobs had not entailed reading and filling in paperwork as an essential function of the job. Having a mentor at this point would have prepared me for discussing my vision impairment and explaining how I would complete these tasks. A mentor from my field would have also opened my eyes to related career opportunities.

For me, the mentoring project at the NRTC seemed promising. The project paired college students who were legally blind with mentors who were legally blind and employed in the student's field of study. Mentees were students in their final year of college. The mentor and mentee pair were instructed to meet in person or by phone at least once a month for one year. Interactions focused on the specific field of employment, the accommodations used to complete jobs in that field, and tips for interviewing and landing a job.

Participants in the mentoring project improved their job-seeking assertiveness (O'Mally & Antonelli, 2016). To show assertiveness during a job interview, individuals who are visually impaired or blind must be comfortable with who they are, portray their strengths, disclose their disability, and identify the accommodations needed to complete the job requirements. One mentee explained it this way: "I believe the most challenging aspect of getting a job is feeling confident in your abilities rather than your impairments."

Mentees also benefitted from having self-confidence modeled by their mentor. As one study participant explained, "One of the most helpful things I learned from my mentor is learning to accept myself as I am, especially my blindness. This journey of acceptance began with accepting that I need to use my white cane in public. Hearing about my mentor's daily use, even during professional interviews, encouraged me to use it and see it as second nature."

When mentors are in the same career field, mentees can also benefit from specific mentor knowledge. One study participant remarked, “Not only does a mentor show the blind job seeker that it is possible to get that job, but having that relationship also is a place to receive personal encouragement as well as strategies for finding jobs that are field specific.” Another mentee stated, “My mentor encouraged me to apply for my certification exams as soon as possible, and because I was not aware that the process would be longer for me, I was not going to have time to apply and take my exams before their due dates. She answered any questions I had regarding my education and future career.”

Mentors also found their roles rewarding. They enjoyed the opportunity to pass along lessons they had learned, seeing their mentees grow, and watching their mentees apply concepts they had discussed. One mentor commented, “In our case, I think we made a relationship that will last beyond the project.”

As a person who is legally blind, I feel strongly that individuals who are blind or visually impaired benefit in many ways from interacting with role models and mentors. Since vision impairment is a low-incidence disability, intentional planning is often needed to connect mentors and role models who are blind or visually impaired with young people who are blind or visually impaired. Programs like the American Foundation for the Blind’s CareerConnect® can help connect individuals who are willing to mentor with those who are looking for a mentor. You may also look to the American Council of the Blind, or other consumer or blindness agencies, to identify potential mentoring opportunities. To learn more about the NRTC’s mentoring project and other employment resources, visit www.blind.msstate.edu. The Employment Mentoring Manual is available free under the Our Products tab.

References

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