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The Value of a Job Search Skills Training for Teens and Young Adults

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We know from research that youth with visual impairments are less likely to have early work experiences and be employed after high school. We also know that paid high school work experience predicts later employment for youth with visual impairments. However, finding those opportunities for early paid work experiences can be challenging, especially for youth with visual impairments who may not have observed their peers seeking out and applying for jobs.

The National Research & Training Center on Blindness & Low Vision (NRTC) recently did a research project to find out if job search skills training is beneficial for youth with visual impairments. As part of this research project, a program was developed to train youth with visual impairments on the various aspects of job search skills. This program is called Putting Your Best Foot Forward (PYBFF).

High school- and college-age youth with visual impairments participated in the PYBFF program. These youth participated in group discussions, role plays, and small-group exercises that focused on using examples to demonstrate their strengths and skills to employers, interacting with employers, learning the importance of networking, disclosing their disability, and overcoming barriers to employment. In addition, the youth had opportunities to practice filling out job applications, write resumes, and participate in two interviews with employers. Researchers followed up with youth periodically to inquire about whether or not they continued to use the skills learned from the program and if they were employed.

I talked with one of the research participants, Shelly (not her real name), about her job search experiences and participating in the PYBFF program. Prior to PYBFF, Shelly was not sure how to start searching for a job and what to do to look for one, although she did some career

preparation in high school. The program helped her realize there is more after school, and that she can be productive in some form or fashion.

Right after the PYBFF program, Shelly participated in a work experience at a local children's hospital and had a specific task for six weeks, which ended up being larger than expected. She wrote policies for the volunteer services program and entered them into the hospital's internal database of policies and procedures. In order to do her task, Shelly had to go through the entire volunteer process to learn how to be a volunteer. She continued to volunteer at the children's hospital after the work experience ended. She is also currently employed at a title and closing company for homes where she assists homebuyers in the process of closing on or refinancing their homes.

The following conversation ensued regarding the impact PYBFF had on Shelly's job search efforts since the end of the project, and to share what she learned with other job seekers with visual impairments.

Anne: Prior to participating in the PYBFF program, had you searched for a job?

Shelly: No, not really. I had worked some for my mom's company, but I was mostly focused on a service project I was leading.

Anne: What did you expect going into the PYBFF program?

Shelly: I didn't really know what to expect. I knew there would be some time devoted to how to work the disability into a conversation. The program helped me learn when and how to talk to employers about disabilities and how to address transportation challenges. It helped me develop my resume and figure out what to put on there. I have self-esteem issues, and the program helped me work on being positive, especially during the mock interviews (interviews with employers), when I had to answer, "why should I hire you

specifically?” That took me a little while to get okay with answering. The class definitely helped me with that. Then also, the idea of networking and everything. I mean, that’s how I got my first job.

Anne: So you mentioned several things about the program from networking, how to write a resume, talking about your disability, a lot of things that seemed to have been a help to you. What was the most valuable part of PYBFF?

Shelly: The mock interviews and the lessons leading up to that. It gave me confidence that I was hireable. The most valuable portion of the program was the preparation we did in the classroom: getting a resume put together, how to put your resume out there, who to contact when you find a job ad, how you should approach that entity whether it be a store or business or whatever situation it is, how to start the conversation if they have put out there that they need help, what to say, what to wait to say, that kind of thing—also, the value of networking.

Anne: Have you used any of the skills you learned from the program?

Shelly: After the program, I applied for a position at a marketing firm. My resume caught their attention, and I was invited to an interview. Although I didn’t have the qualifications they were looking for, I was able to make a good argument about the marketing experience I had gained with my service project by talking to local companies to get them to donate items to my project. I also mentioned how I worked with the marketing people at the children’s hospital to design a logo, and then met with a company to add the logo at a minimal price to bags and blankets. When I explained to the interviewer that I had not worked for a marketing firm, I could tell the interviewer’s interest went downhill. Being able to identify they’re not as interested in me based on what I learned from PYBFF

helped to lessen the blow of not getting the job. It did give me interviewing experience and feeling what that was like. That was good. I also sought a job at an apartment complex nearby. I did research on the complex's business structure and found out they were hiring. I submitted a resume and application. Unfortunately, they had already filled the position, but I employed the skills I learned in the class as far as finding a possible situation that might work.

Anne: So, it sounds like you have been using the job search skills in many ways in looking for a job. Do you have any advice for other young job searchers with blindness or low vision?

Shelly: When going for an interview, if you have a cane with you, you are showing proof of your disability. So, be prepared to disclose that you have a visual impairment and that you have technology that can help (you perform the necessary job duties). It's up to you as the person with blindness how you tell the interviewer about your visual impairment. The interviewer may want you to go ahead and put it out there if you have a visible disability. Also, the idea of networking is super important. Sometimes you don't know what opportunities are hidden and the value of people that you know. They can open up doors. There was a person in my network that I hadn't really thought about. I had no idea that he would be such a great help. The value of networking is often much greater than you can imagine. Sometimes knowing someone and having a foot in the door is more important than anything else. Develop your network; don't lose your network.

Shelly said her ability to network and her strong communication skills helped her get her current job. Shelly has realized she's become a valuable piece in the process of getting someone from loan application to homeownership. Although Shelly is employed, she continues to use the

skills learned from PYBFF to look for a job with more upward mobility and opportunities to grow professionally.

The importance of job search skills cannot be underestimated, especially for youth with visual impairments. These skills not only help youth find employment as adults, but they also help them find employment opportunities as they progress through their education, which contributes to gainful employment as adults. Other participants from the study mentioned they liked having the opportunities to call employers and ask about job openings, learning how to ask for accommodations, and role playing different job search scenarios. Several participants also said the program encouraged them to be less shy and more self-confident. Thus, learning job search skills helped youth with visual impairments build confidence and learn how to advocate for their needs. Searching for a job can be difficult for anyone, but with the right skills, the process is a lot easier.

The NRTC has developed several products for youth with visual impairments and their parents from this research project, including fact sheets related to employment and SSI and videos on how to prepare for a video interview. Other NRTC products for job seekers, but not specific to this project, are the Resource Sheet for Job Seekers and Career Advantage for V.I.P.s. If you are interested in learning more about the PYBFF program, outcomes from the research project, or other products for job seekers, visit the NRTC website at www.blind.msstate.edu.

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