ThinkCollege
TRANSITION PROJECT

GRAB AND GO PRACTICES

CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT—DEVELOPING AN EMPLOYER NETWORK

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> This Grab and Go Practice is part of a series helping students, parents, teachers, and job developers create customized employment opportunities for students with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

An important part of helping an individual find a job involves building relationships with the business community. Many job developers limit their job search to the larger, more visible companies, such as retail chains, fast food restaurants and large manufacturing companies (Griffin & Hammis, 2005). However, by narrowing their search to these bigger businesses, they run the risk of overlooking job opportunities in smaller organizations. Companies with less than 20 workers make up 89.4 percent of businesses in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014) and can often provide greater job opportunities, especially when their work matches up with the job seekers' vocational interests.

The phrase "It's not what you know, it's who you know" is absolutely true. When done right, developing an employer network can result in more job leads, referrals, advice, information, and support.

People in an employment network can help in many ways:

- Providing information about a particular industry.
- Introducing the student to people who work in a business or job field.
- Setting up informational interviews, arranging job tours, job sampling opportunities & internships.
- Providing inside information on the key decision-makers in a particular business.

IDENTIFY THE STUDENT'S EXISTING CONNECTIONS

To develop an employer network, the job developer can start by helping students think about the people in their life, the places they visit, and associations they have in the community. A relationship map will help document and give structure as to who may be able to help open doors to the business world. Job developers, teachers, and coaches can add their own relevant contacts. The student should also ask other members of their team (family members, friends, community members) about any shared interests and places they go related to those interests. All of these groups can provide valuable information and connections.

There are 3 sections in a relationship map:

1. SKILLS AND INTERESTS

Help the student identify their skills and interest areas. Write down the names of people and places they know that share those interests.

2. COMMUNITY AFFILIATIONS

List the people and places the student is connected to in their community, such as churches, clubs, and civic groups.

3. PLACES/WORK/LEARNING

List the places the student frequents (e.g. cafes, gym, book stores or grocery stores), the workplaces of the people they know (former employers, family, friends), and the schools and places for learning in their community (counselors, past and present teachers).

DOCUMENT AND MAINTAIN EMPLOYMENT CONNECTIONS

Keep track of your connections. A relationship map is one way to record this information. You should also develop a database (such as an excel file) to enter a contact's name, title, company, address, phone number and email, as well as the dates of contact.

WHAT TO ASK FOR?

Remember that you aren't approaching people specifically for a job, but to develop contacts and gather information about a particular job field. Be clear what the conversation is about:

- Describe the type of work the student has shown an interest in.
- Do they know of businesses or other people who do similar work?
- What are the challenges of doing this type of work?
- What steps would they recommend for building a career in this job field?

Sam is enrolled in an animal care certificate program at a local community college. To help him learn about the different jobs in the veterinarian field his coach contacted a friend who worked at an animal medical center who was able to set Sam up with a job tour of the facility.

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Think College Transition Project is a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston.

CONTACTING SMALL BUSINESSES

Small businesses rely heavily on word-of-mouth marketing – know somebody who knows somebody – ask your contacts who they might know at various small businesses. Develop a relationship with a small business owner by becoming a customer. Many small businesses may be struggling and can't afford to hire new staff; through getting to know them you may be able to show an employer how hiring your jobseeker can actually improve their bottom line.

OTHER NETWORKING STRATEGIES

- Develop a 30 second "elevator" pitch explaining who you are and what you do.
- Contact the college career services office for a targeted list of employers in the student's community.
- Attend employer networking events and job fairs sponsored by the college's career services office and the local Chamber of Commerce.
- Join a service club (Rotary) to meet local business leaders.
- Speak to people in the student's community (e.g. people working in city hall).
- Meet with companies that your school or organization does business with to set up job tours and internships.
- Speak with members of the school community (school committee, teachers, school personnel).
- Use Facebook, Linkedin to identify people in a particular job field or in a specific company.
- Register at www.meetup.com to find out about different business networking events in your area.

People generally like to talk about their business and the type of work they do. If the conversation at one of these networking events is going well, you may end by saying: "I've never seen your business before. Would you mind if I call you to set up a time for a chat and a tour of your workplace?"

> *Rob has taken a variety of acting classes at college. For four summers, he worked full time at a local YMCA camp as an assistant drama counselor, where one of his responsibilities included leading the young campers in drama activities. Rob knew the camp director and approached him for a summer job.*

CONCLUSION

Developing relationships with potential employers takes time and thoughtful planning. Networking is a highly efficient and successful technique that can be used to expand your employer pool and to help get your foot in the door.

EXAMPLE RELATIONSHIP MAP

SKILLS AND INTERESTS
Animal care (Christine)
Shredding papers (Melody)
Math facts
Movie titles and trailers (Mark)
Birthdates
Foundations and funding
Reading
Golf

COMMUNITY AFFILIATIONS
Town Hall (family)
Church (family)
Rotary Club (Sam)
Public access cable station (Robert)
Post office (Dennis)
Habitat for Humanity (Jodie)

PLACES / WORK / LEARNING
All Hands Disaster Relief organization (Julie)
TJ Maxx (Ross)
Mahoneys Hardware (Barbara)
Whaling Museum (Mark)
Kool Kone (Tom)
Buttonwood Park Zoo (Pat)
Oxford Creamery (Sam)
Nicks Pizza (Nate)
Bristol Community College (Christine)
Caddy Shack (Jodie)
Angel Memorial Hospital (Chris)
Cape Wildlife Sanctuary (Pat)
Bourne All Pets Veterinary (Pat)
Westplace Animal Sanctuary (Sam)

(Kernan, Wetherow, & Wetherow, 2014)

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