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VCU-RRTC on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities

Research Study #3: Customized Employment -- CASE STUDY #3



“What would you like to be when you grow up?”

This is a common question asked of students as they move through their school years and approach graduation. Unfortunately, it may not be a question asked of many students with disabilities. All too often, they have limited work experiences and cannot respond if asked what they would like to do. Alternatively, professionals may not identify their interests and talents that could be invaluable assets to businesses. This unfortunately may result in unemployment or underemployment post-graduation.

A key component of customized employment is getting to know job seekers to discover their interests and skills. This process focuses on each person's strengths and not disabilities. By exploring what the person enjoys doing through observations at home, in the community, and at local businesses, the employment specialist can help the person set and achieve employment goals. Approaching employment from this perspective enables employment specialists to negotiate customized positions that match each person's unique skills and interests.



MEET JEREMY!

Jeremy, not his real name, learned about a research study on customized employment during an appointment at the Children's Hospital of Richmond in January of 2016. Jeremy and his family were eager for him to participate, because he had not found a job since graduating from high school in June of 2014. Jeremy had been volunteering at a local nonprofit organization and participating in a “young life program,” but none of these activities was paid employment.

Jeremy had ideas on the types of tasks and work he liked and did not like when he first met with his employment specialist. He shared that that his dream job was to be a radio DJ.

In his free time, Jeremy enjoys listening to the radio and often calls in to his favorite shows to request songs. When getting to know Jeremy, the employment specialist learned that he had an online “Spreaker.com” account. This website allows individuals to produce podcasts and store them online. Memberships range from free to scheduled fees for specific services. On his Spreaker account, Jeremy was conducting and storing staff interviews from his non-paid volunteer work at the nonprofit. He was also creating commercials for his father’s business. The employment specialist began to brainstorm how this talent could lead to a job that he would enjoy.

What were some of Jeremy’s discovery

Although Jeremy had a specific career goal of being a DJ, he and his employment specialist were told that it is a difficult field to break into during their discovery activities. This attitude about the career possibilities of people with disabilities is one that often discourages individuals from pursuing their interests. Customized employment seeks to overcome these negative attitudes and barriers!



activities?

Jeremy and his family met with his employment specialist and discussed his career goals and interests. As a team, they agreed that Jeremy really enjoys social interaction and engagement with people. He also enjoys learning new technology skills. This was evident in the fact that he had taught himself how to record and upload music for his Spreaker account. Jeremy’s employment specialist observed him during one of his community activities. She learned he has great computer skills, had problem solving skills in a familiar setting, and great interpersonal communication.

Since Jeremy expressed an interest in becoming a DJ, his employment specialist reached out to a recording studio to set up an informational interview. The employment specialist knew the account executive from attending business networking meetings hosted by Synapse in Richmond, VA. Synapse’s mission is to help businesses and nonprofits in communities connect with one another to foster greater economic and community development. Businesses and nonprofits pay an annual membership fee in order to attend these meetings.

During the tour, Jeremy impressed the account executive with his knowledge of the field and the recording studio. Jeremy explained that prior to his tour he had researched the company and knew where other offices were located as well as projects they had recently worked on. At the end of the meeting, the account executive sat down with Jeremy to learn more about his career goals. Jeremy shared that he had always listened to the radio and liked how DJs interact with callers or interview musicians. The account executive said that radio as an industry is changing and shared his opinion that podcasts are the next big thing in social media. This might be an area for Jeremy to consider!



Jeremy liked the account executive’s suggestion to learn more about podcasts and other forms of social media.

Jeremy’s interest in becoming a radio DJ could have become limiting, but identifying the particular aspects of that job that interested him allowed him to expand his employment opportunities. He decided to explore his interests in radio to social media.



What is Jeremy's job and how was it customized?

At another Synapse networking meeting, Jeremy's employment specialist met the owner of a car wash that had been recently been purchased. During the meeting, he mentioned that one of his goals was to advertise changes made to the car wash. Preliminary research revealed that they did not have an active Facebook or Instagram account. Jeremy's employment specialist approached the owner and requested an informational interview to learn more about the car wash's operations and current business needs.

During the informational interview, the owner confirmed that they did not utilize social media to advertise effectively, and he would be interested in hiring someone in that role. The owner currently had a very small staff that was knowledgeable about cars and car detailing but did not have the time or knowledge to maintain social media accounts.

After the interview, Jeremy's employment specialist wrote an employment proposal presenting the case for a social media and administrative assistant. She consulted with contacts from her networking group who owned social media consulting firms when writing the employment proposal. By seeking guidance, the employment specialist was able to learn about an industry in which she did not have personal experience. Additional administrative tasks included in the proposal included identified unmet business needs discussed with the owner during the informational interview. After considering the proposal, the owner decided to hire Jeremy to create social media content. Jeremy was hired in October 2016 to help the carwash script, interview, film and edit videos to highlight services provided by the carwash. Jeremy also assists with research on local companies with which the car wash can collaborate.

Jeremy splits his time between working at the car wash and doing work in a home office. Typically, he films at the car wash and edits or conducts research at home. Jeremy's preference is not to work at home but the office at the car wash is not accessible. The owner is not required to make modifications since he employs fewer than 15 employees. Currently, Jeremy and his employment specialist are working with his vocational rehabilitation counselor to make modifications to the work environment. These modifications will allow him to work at Splash and Dash instead of telecommuting from a home office, which is his preference.

Jeremy conducted online research on what would be the best editing software, and the car wash purchased it for him. Jeremy independently learned how to use the software. His employment specialist helped him create a script format to follow for his videos and provided initial guidance on how to research and find video topics. Gradually, as Jeremy grew more comfortable and learned more about cars and car detailing, he became independent in this area as well.

Weather permitting and during slower traffic times, Jeremy sometimes works out of a closed bay on the ground level of the car wash where the owner and head detailer also work. Because Jeremy sometimes works remotely, he communicates directly with the owner via text throughout his workday. Jeremy presents his topic ideas and videos to his supervisor and coworkers at their weekly staff meetings. Jeremy also created his own signature sign off, approved by the owner.



RESOURCES: **Impairment Related Work Expense** -- Social Security can deduct the cost of certain impairment-related items and services that a person with a disability needs to work from gross earnings when calculating the person's monthly payment amount. An IRWE can be deducted for substantial gainful activity (SGA) purposes when:

- The item(s) or service(s) enables the person to work;
- The person needs the item(s) or service(s) because of a physical or mental impairment;
- The person pays for the item(s) or service(s) and are not reimbursed by another source such as Medicare, Medicaid, or a private insurance carrier; and
- The cost is "reasonable", that is, it represents the standard charge for the item or service in the community.

Additional information is available by visiting the Social Security Administration website:

<https://www.ssa.gov/redbook/eng/ssdi-and-ssi-employments-supports.htm#>

UZURV -- UZURV is a Richmond, VA based company that developed an app to let riders schedule and select their Uber or Lyft drivers. This app gives riders the confidence and comfort in knowing who their driver is, and the ability to communicate any special rider requests such as calling ahead or assistance to the car for elderly passengers and passengers with disabilities. UZURV also partnered with VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center to offer their drivers an online disability awareness and sensitivity training course. UZURV has expanded their service cities nationwide. <https://uzurv.com/>

Work Incentive Planning and Assistance (WIPA) -- The goal of the WIPA program is to enable beneficiaries with disabilities to receive accurate information, and use that information to make a successful transition to work. Each WIPA project has Community Work Incentives Coordinators who will:

- provide in-depth counseling about benefits and the effect of work on those benefits;
- conduct outreach efforts to beneficiaries of SSI and SSDI (and their families) who are potentially eligible to participate in Federal or State work incentives programs; and
- work in cooperation with Federal, State, and private agencies and nonprofit organizations that serve disabled SSI and SSDI beneficiaries.

<https://www.ssa.gov/work/WIPA.html>

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The authors of this case study are Dr. Katherine Inge and Ms. Stephanie Lau at Virginia Commonwealth University's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities. If you have questions on this fact sheet and on the VCU-RRTC, you may contact Dr. Inge, Project Director at [kinge@vcu.edu] or (804) 828-5956.

For more information on the VCU-RRTC, please visit -- <http://www.vcurrtc.org>.

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