Work It Out:
Employment and Postsecondary Graduates with Disabilities

by Evelyne Marcil, Laura King, Alice Havel, Catherine Fichten, & Mary Jorgensen

Introduction

After working hard in college and university for many years, most students assume they will obtain employment when they complete their studies. In the case of graduates with disabilities, finding a job is a major concern (Martiniello et al., 2011). Research shows that too often graduates with disabilities are underemployed or work in low-skill jobs (Lindstrom, Kahn & Lindsey, 2013). Although there is great variability in the percentage of postsecondary graduates with disabilities who are employed after graduation, in some studies figures as low as 53% have been reported (Erickson, Lee & von Schrader, 2014). Given that there are multiple barriers to employment for graduates with disabilities (e.g., Ameri, Schur, Adya, Bentley, McKay & Kruse, 2015; Boman, Kjellberg, Danermark, & Boman, 2015; Erickson, Lee & von Schrader, 2014; Lindstrom, Kahn & Lindsey, 2013), but that in a few cases completion of a postsecondary degree appears to mitigate some of these barriers (Barile et al., 2012; Fichten et al., 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2015), we decided to ask postsecondary graduates with disabilities who were successful in finding a job how they achieved this success. By doing so, we were seeking a greater understanding of successful job search strategies among college and university graduates with disabilities. We also proposed a preliminary series of recommendations to help graduates with disabilities looking for employment succeed in their search.

Method

We contacted 16 English-speaking participants from previous studies who told us that they had a job and interviewed them about their job search process. 3 had graduated from college and 13 from university. Participants' disabilities included visual impairment, hearing impairment, mobility impairment, learning disability, chronic health problems, and multiple disabilities (e.g., visual impairment and mental illness, neurological impairment and chronic health problems). Short interviews (10-15 minutes) were conducted over the phone, through email, or via Skype. Participants were asked the following open-ended questions:

1) Did you graduate and what was your most recent program of study?
2) (a) Are you currently employed? Are you employed in a full-time (35 hours or more per week) or part-time (less than 35 hours per week) capacity? or
   (b) Have you had a job since you graduated from postsecondary education? Were you employed in a full-time or part-time capacity?
3) (a) What is your job? How long have you had it? or
   (b) What was your job? For how long did you have it?
4) How did you find out about your job?
5) How long did it take you to find your job?
6) What helped you get your job?
7) What advice would you give a recent graduate who has a disability, to help them find a job?
8) Is there anything that you would like to add?

Results

Participants' jobs were varied and included store manager, teacher, lawyer, and translator. Although many participants had jobs related to their field of study, some worked in a different field (e.g., studying in pastoral ministry and working as a youth centre counselor). When asked about their current or last job, 80% were employed full-time and 20% part-time. All 16 participants had obtained employment within 12 months of graduating. Nine participants did not even look for a job; they were hired where they had completed their internship or were already working when they finished their studies.

In order of importance, participants learned about job opportunities through contacts, an employment centre or job website, volunteering, and in other ways (e.g., already employed there). Regarding strategies to obtain employment, participants noted, in order of importance, contacts, skill set, volunteering, already working there, and other strategies (e.g., personal qualities, experience in the field, good CV).

Regarding advice participants would give to recent postsecondary graduates with disabilities looking for a job, answers were divided in the "four P's" of employment. These were, in order of importance, Practical (e.g., work on CV, prepare for interview), Personal (e.g., accept yourself, do not give up), People (e.g., network, having someone to vouch for you is good), and Professional experience (e.g., volunteering, internship).

It is noteworthy that some participants suggested disclosing a disability, whereas others advised against it.

Discussion

Even though research has constantly shown that barriers to employment and career advancement exist for individuals with disabilities (Ameri, Schur, Adya, Bentley, McKay & Kruse, 2015; Boman, Kjellberg, Danermark & Boman, 2015; Erickson, Lee & von Schrader, 2014; Lindstrom, Kahn & Lindsey, 2013), higher education seems to be an effective way to overcome some of these (Barile et al., 2012; Fichten et al., 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2015). This is good news, as more and more individuals with disabilities are attending postsecondary institutions (Fichten et al., 2012).

In the present study of employed postsecondary graduates with disabilities, most participants held skilled positions, such as lawyers or translators, even though not all were working in their field of study. Although not specifically focused on job advancement, our study showed that even in relatively low-skill jobs, our participants were high up in the hierarchy (e.g., store manager). In terms of strategies used by our participants to obtain employment, networking seemed to be an important strategy. Indeed, a third of our participants reported contacts as being one reason as to why they got their job.

Participants in the present study were also asked to provide advice for the next generation of graduates with disabilities who would be searching for a job. Their answers were divided into the "four P's" of employment: Practical, Personal, People, and Professional experience. Not surprisingly, this advice closely resembles the strategies that helped our participants obtain employment. The "contacts" element of strategies translates into the "people" part of the advice; "volunteering/internship" and "already working in the field" are related to "professional experience;" the "skill set" section of strategies translates into the "practical" advice; and a large part of the "other" category relates to the "personal" part of the "four P's."

Implications

Choosing to disclose or not to disclose one's disability in the workplace is a difficult decision. One participant mentioned that disclosing a disability could be beneficial, as some employers have quotas for hiring individuals with disabilities. This suggests that before applying, graduates with disabilities need to carefully research information regarding the prospective employer. Two participants advised against disclosing a disability, as this could lead to prejudice. In this case, they suggested showing the employer what one can do before disclosing - if disclosing at all. So, should one disclose one's disability or not? This is not always a choice, as some individuals

cannot hide their disability, even if they wanted to (e.g., someone who is a wheelchair user). On the other hand, employers cannot provide accommodations if they are not aware of their employees' needs. Thus, as a general recommendation, individuals should disclose only 1) if their disability might impact their work performance, 2) if the gains of disclosing (e.g., accommodations, quotas for employment) outweigh the potential pitfalls (e.g., discrimination, not getting the job), and 3) if they are comfortable disclosing their disability.

An important goal of this investigation was to devise a series of recommendations to help graduates with disabilities looking for employment succeed in their search. Another very important part of the present study is that the "four P's" of employment are likely to apply to graduates with and without disabilities. Advice such as, "Don't give up" or "Prepare for the interview" apply to everyone. This might have to do with the fact that a postsecondary diploma or degree mitigates barriers to employment, which can make employment rates of postsecondary graduates with disabilities similar to those without disabilities (Barile et al., 2012; Fichten et al., 2012; Jorgensen et al., 2015). The take-home message of this study is that strategies and advice for obtaining employment for postsecondary graduates with disabilities do not seem to differ from those that are useful to the general population.

Acknowledgments

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The Power of Introversion in Student Services

by Cliff Robinson

It's been called the Introversion Spring. The TED talk by Susan Cain, author of Quiet: The Power of Introversion in a World That Can't Stop Talking, has been viewed an astonishing 15,000,000 times and sits at number 11 on the top 20 list of most popular TED talks of all time. Include "Introversion" in the title of a conference presentation, you are guaranteed a packed house… of introverts. Run a Google image search on "introversion", up comes a thousand of what the kids nowadays call "dank memes."

Situated on the opposite ends of the introversion-extroversion spectrum, my colleague and I started collaborating three years ago to explore this topic and its implications for our work. Our first conference presentation on introversion was three years ago in Kingston with the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE). Our topic was increasing higher education accessibility for introverted students, and the format was Speed Dating. The rules of Speed Dating are clear: participants attend a 20-minute presentation then leave to attend another presentation. But in an equally clear violation of the rules, participants at our presentation on introversion refused to leave. And more came with each round. By the end of the third round of Speed Dating Introversion, the rule-violating introverts were three rows deep.

A year later, we were back at STLHE, now in Vancouver, and with a longer and different take on the same topic: higher education accessibility for introverted educators. I greeted one lonely and fellow extrovert in room packed full of introverts. This past year, in Winnipeg for CACUSS, with yet a different spin on introversion – this time the accessibility and inclusion of introverted students and professionals in student services – it was the same experience: a packed house with not enough chairs and one lonely, fellow extrovert.

The trilogy of presentations were all different, with some common elements. Each had an overview of the introversion-extroversion spectrum, highlighting specific differences in neurology, preference, and tendencies, and the implications for our work. And each invited participants to wrestle with questions about how our work creates obstacles for introverted educators, student services professionals, and students – and how we might do better.

There is a compelling case that we need to do better in order to better meet the needs of all of our students, and to address our own needs as educators and student service professionals. Despite the obvious broad appeal of these ideas of accessibility and inclusion of introverts, we are at the very beginning in exploring possibilities for more effectively working with each other (Grant, 2012).

The Introvert Spring is here, with 15,000,000 hits and almost as many dank memes. But we still seem to be a long way from the goal of valuing contemplation as much as participation, of seeing gregariousness as optional, and of inviting introverts and extroverts to do what we each do best.

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