

Transition from School to Work
Utilizing Person Centred Planning to Navigate the
Transition from School to Work
Strategies to help "pave the way"

By Rita Mandik

I remember that day very well.

It had been a long one, and I was trying to wrap things up so I could go home to my daughters. Donna, my administration facilitator, suddenly appeared at my door, looking very tired and 'stressed out'. I knew immediately what had happened from the expression on her face.

"You got another one, didn't you?" I asked tentatively.

"Yes" she answered, "My third crying mother this week."

A pattern was clearly developing in our office, with an ever-increasing number of phone calls from distraught parents of transitioning students. Their children were either getting ready to graduate or had just graduated, and they were learning that navigating the world of "adult services" was very different than what they had experienced in the school system. Parents were finding that their adult children were not necessarily guaranteed a job or enrolled in any kind of work preparation program, and services for high school graduates (like employment training, community living, etc.) were not "automatically" available. In Pennsylvania, it is important for students with special needs to register for adult services while they are still in high school, and even then there is often a lengthy waiting list. Money for job training after graduation is limited in most states, so if these young people were graduating with no career path or employment history, they often were not well-prepared for their transition to the working world.

What can we do to help these students to be better prepared?

We have observed that it is really helpful to the transition process when the students begin to think about work and careers as soon as possible, preferably by age 14. This doesn't mean they should be out there working, but there are many different ways to build that foundation.

Visiting different types of businesses, volunteering for local community groups, getting involved in school activities or outside clubs are all ways that these kids can get exposure to their worlds and begin to develop their own gifts and interest. For a young person -with or without a special need -to make an educated decision about his or her future, he needs to pull from life experiences, successes and challenges. My advice to parents and teachers is to give these children as many types of experiences as possible. Help them find their gifts and talents as early as possible, so these skills and interest can be encouraged and cultivated.

So, what happened the day of that tearful phone call? With the support of our agency, Ken Crest Services, we decided we had to try to do all we could to help these students and their families through the transition process- which meant we had a lot to learn in a short period of time. We certainly didn't have all the answers, but we did have over 25 years of experience in providing job supports to people with developmental disabilities. Our staff researched best practices, met with students and their teachers and families, made some mistakes along the way (of course) and developed some theories that seem to be working. The goal of this article is to share some of these observations with other people who are navigating the transition from school to work/ adulthood, hoping to provide some assistance and guidance for their journey.

How do we get started?

We have found it very helpful to begin our services with person centred planning.

A true "person-centred plan" covers every area of an individual's life, and requires a great deal of time and commitment from the person's team members. Since many of the students we were meeting with only wanted or needed to focus on work skills, we made some adaptations and created our own format for a person-centred Career Plan. For this approach to be effective, several key elements need to be in place:

Student empowerment

The student should be deciding who will be present at his or her career plan, and where they would be most comfortable holding the meeting. It is essential that the young person play as active role as possible in the entire process. We have facilitated these meetings for many students, some of whom have excellent communication skills and others who are very limited in this area. Staff who have experienced running these types of meetings know how to include people of every functioning level, ensuring the student is comfortable and participating as much as possible in the plan development.

Team involvement

It is very important that people who play a major role in the life of the student be involved on some level, so that the end result is truly an all inclusive plan. This means family, friends, school professionals and anyone else who is interested can contribute- like possibly the local scout leader or the piano teacher. Each of these people knows the student from a different angle, and many know of gifts or talents that are not seen in other environments that can be included in the Career Plan. In addition, the more team participants, the bigger the student's "network". Team members can use their contacts to help identify possible volunteer or job opportunities for the students, and may be the key on how the young person can get his or her foot in the door of that company.

Identifying strengths as well as support needs.

As meeting facilitators, we frequently find ourselves in the position where team members are so concerned about the student that they need to focus on their worries, concerns and what the student

cannot do. We have learned that it is just as important- actually more so- to bring the group back to what the student enjoys doing and identifying his or her strengths. The key in helping students with special needs to be successful in community employment is in the job match. The student needs to 1) enjoy what he or she is doing. 2) feel successful as well as challenged in the job duties and 3) be in an environment conducive to learning for their particular student. Identifying what type of work environment will be best requires input from everyone. As job developers and trainers, we need to know what to look for-if we need to avoid workplaces with strong odours, close working conditions, background noises, etc.

Patience with the process

If a student and his or her team decide that person centred planning is right for them, they do need to keep in mind that the right job match often takes time to find. Staff facilitating these plans need to find businesses where the desired positions exist, meet with those employers to learn more about the job, explain the "job coaching" process, analyse the position to make sure all of the correct pieces are in place (Environmental supports, accessible supervisors, etc.) and then bring the student in for an interview. This process takes time, and sometimes businesses need to be approached before the right job match is identified.

Some degree of flexibility

Students and their teams need to decide what is necessary in a job placement and what is preferable. It is difficult to find a position that is perfect in every way, so there may need to be a compromise. An example of an area that often needs such flexibility is in the student's work schedule. Many students don't want to work nights and weekends- that's their preference. The reality is that most part-time entry-level jobs require weekend and/or evening work, and talking an employer into making an "exception" for the student with disabilities can get the student off to a negative start with co workers and supervisors. Decisions about what is and what is not negotiable need to be made carefully and thoughtfully, taking everyone's needs into consideration.

With all this careful planning and support, there's no way anything can go wrong, right? Unfortunately, many things can happen in the business world that we cannot control, and that can be really scary- especially to parents. Companies downsize, lay-offs occur, managers change and so on. It has been our experience that these "uncontrollable" can cause the most stress and frustration for caring family members. Unfortunately, no matter how hard schools and agencies try, there are going to be situations not in our control. It's a reality of life -but it's important to keep in mind that it's also the way people grow.

Think back on your own childhood. What were some of the experiences you had that helped you to be the person you are today? How did you learn about abstract concepts like boundaries and workplace expectations? What types of experiences helped you to be more assertive, to grow as an individual? For any of us, there are just as many "negative" experiences that come to mind as there are positive- possibly more. None of us want to see the people we care about getting hurt, or disappointed or feeling like they "failed". We do need to be careful though, not to overprotect them, to a point where

they are not having the types of experiences they need to have for them to grow into the strong adults we know they can be.

Wherever your student is after graduation (a group home, a workshop, a community job, living at home, etc.) there are going to be challenges and disappointments along with the successes. Ups and downs are a natural part of life, and it is often how we view and respond to these challenges that determine our character. For instance, it is possible your son or daughter may one day have a boss who is not very understanding and may get fired from a job. He or she may miss a bus. Someone in the community might be mean. We don't want any of those things to happen, certainly, but they do happen to people all the time, both with and without special needs. Sometimes it's by "being fired" that a person learns what job is not for them. It becomes our responsibility in these situations to not cast blame (on ourselves or anyone else) but to constructively try to figure out where the issues were and how to utilise the experience as a positive stepping stone to a successful future. What is most important is that the student has someone who loves them there to support them through those times that life isn't "fair", family members and professionals who can help them learn and grow from experience and move on as a stronger person for having had that experience. Person-centred planning emphasises the importance of past experiences, recognises efforts and accomplishments, and looks at life as a path to be travelled. Transitions happen all the time along this path, and help us to be who we are today and who we can still be. Most of us can easily identify those people in our own lives who care about us and help us learn from our experiences and keep growing -just as we need to do for our students in transition.

Rita Mandik is a graduate of Immaculata University in Chester County, Pennsylvania. She has worked with individuals with developmental disabilities since 1980, and is presently the director of Ken-Crest EmployNet, a job training and work preparation program. EmployNet is part of Ken-Crest Services, a 100 year old agency that supports over 6,000 individuals of all ages who experience developmental disabilities in Southern Pennsylvania and the state of Delaware.



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