

# Taking Action Before Graduation: 8 Effective Steps to Employment Success

By Cary Griffin and Dave Hammis

## Introduction

Alicia received her Certificate of Attendance from public school facing unemployment. Luckily, the local community rehabilitation program (CRP) leveraged Vocational Rehabilitation and Developmental Disabilities funds to assist her in finding a job. Alicia made no secret of her love for children, but her school program only offered training in office skills and short unpaid work experiences bussing tables at a restaurant. Alicia, with assistance from an employment specialist, visited several day care centers but found no jobs available for individuals without experience. Digging deeper into Alicia's interests revealed that she enjoyed using computers loaded with basic math and reading software. Even with minimal reading and math skills, the software served as her guide, and her ability to manipulate the programs and her enthusiasm lead the employment specialist to suggest that Alicia become a computer tutor for children.

Alicia worked with her team locating a pre-school program that needed computer equipment and an instructor. Using a personal budget (money directed to her employment success) Alicia brought a new computer and software into a day care facility, becoming their newest employee. The business charges families extra for computer tutoring, and Alicia is paid for her work. Three years later, the \$5000 investment in equipment and software, along with job coach support setting up the operation, has paid off, allowing Alicia the success she dreamed of, and increasing the profitability of a local business.

Alicia's story is not typical. Today, only 26% of adults with developmental disabilities are working (Hall, et al, in press). However, with a bit of planning and an understanding of employment options, transition-aged youth can attain vocational success.

## Customizing Employment

Alicia's story serves as an inventive, but simple, approach to creating employment. Traditional competitive employment fails people with disabilities. There are many entry-level jobs available for people with disabilities, but career advancement, and doing what one loves is rare for individuals with significant disabilities. Therefore, changing our understanding of employment and our approach to getting jobs is necessary. The starting point is knowing the process, what's possible, and what resources are available.

**Raise expectations.** Families are often discouraged from having dreams for their children with disabilities, which results in many adults living lives of isolation and poverty. Expecting children to grow up and work is a crucial first step to success. Make certain that children have household chores, after-school jobs, and summer employment.

**Expectations are followed by action.** One critical activity is saving for the future. Families should consider establishing an “employment fund” for their child just as they might for a sibling expected to attend college. This fund can be used for advanced training, buying tools, securing transportation, or starting a business.

**Advocate for real work experience.** Work experiences should be paid either by the school, an arrangement through a youth employment program sponsored by the local Workforce Center or One-Stop, by VR, or by the employer. These time-limited try-outs match the interests of the individual and reveal the supports necessary for success, the best teaching approaches, and illuminate future options for work and study. Wages build a work ethic, garner peer status, and reinforce the connection between labor and reward. Most of us had after school or summer jobs as children, and we got paid for that work.

**Augment exploitable resources.** The best jobs go to those who earn profits for their employer. Special Education graduates do not typically bring obvious exploitable skills to the employer, therefore having equipment or tools that enhance employability are crucial to career advancement. Alicia’s talents were augmented by computer equipment. Using these assets, a job that did not exist was created. Using valued resources to secure employment is the analogous to using a college degree to get a job (Griffin, Hammis & Geary, in preparation).

**Apply for Social Security.** As graduation approaches, parents should investigate eligibility for the Social Security (SSA) system. Social Security provides a variety of work incentives available to students including the Student Earned Income Exclusion which allows those enrolled in educational programs to earn up to \$1460 per month and \$5,910 per year before reducing SSI monthly payments ([www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov)).

Social Security also allows for the Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS). This work incentive allows an individual to maintain a monthly check and simultaneously receive SSA payments to pursue a career, pay for transportation, get training or degrees, or start a business of their own (Griffin & Hammis, 2003).

**Arrange for a smooth transition.** Many states have waiting lists for adult services, so graduating with a paid job, and plenty of work experience is crucial. Apply to the state for case management services and apply for vocational supports at the local One-Stop center.

**Consider self employment as an option.** Business ownership is the fastest growing employment option in America today and many people with disabilities have ideas and interests that easily translate into money-making opportunities. Consider starting early and remember how young most children are when they open their first lemonade stand.

**Use the family network.** Most people get their jobs through personal contacts. Families consume local goods and services and have friends and colleagues. Use these contacts to advocate for work experiences and jobs for your child with a disability.

## References

Griffin, C.C. and Hammis, D. (2003). Making Self Employment Work for People with Disabilities, Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.

Griffin, C.C., Hammis, D. & Geary, T. (in preparation). The Job Developer's Handbook: Practical Tactics for Customized Employment. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.

Hall, A., Butterworth, J., Winsor, J., Gilmore, D. & Metzel, D. (in press). Pushing the Employment Agenda: Case study research of high performing states in integrated employment.

Many employment resources are available at [www.griffinhammis.com](http://www.griffinhammis.com) ;  
<http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition> ; [www.worksupport.com](http://www.worksupport.com) ;  
[www.employmentforall.org](http://www.employmentforall.org)