



Advocating at Work with a Team

“I have a Job. I am working!” These are wonderful words. It means I am independent. I am growing away from my parents and into my own life. I have money of my own to spend on what I want. I have a career. I am productive. I contribute to society.

How do you get ready to talk to your employer?

To be successful at work, your employer needs to understand what you can do. They need to understand that you may need support to be more productive and more independent. You can show people that you can do a good job and want to learn new skills and do more challenging tasks. Someday you can be eligible for a promotion or to get a different job.

To write this tip sheet I interviewed three young adults with disabilities. All of these young people have jobs and were able to put together and work with a team to advocate for their needs. Each of them had help from therapists, job coaches, and school programs. They all take home a paycheck. They had a lot to learn, as having a job was a big, exciting, scary challenge in their lives. One of the scariest was “talking to our bosses.”

Sebastian: Sebastian is 29 years old and has a Traumatic Brain Injury, (TBI). After getting his job, his employer and co-workers needed to learn more about his TBI and how it affected his job. He was able to teach them with the help of his team, which included himself, his therapists and his job coach. Together, they created a job plan that is used by himself, his employer, co-workers and therapists. This plan included ways to work with and around his short-term memory loss. These strategies [ideas for accommodations] included using signs and notes [visuals] in his work area so that he could remember where things in the office were located. Another accommodation was to create “The Answers Binder”. This binder lists all of his job tasks that he was responsible for at work. Each task was broken down into steps to help him remember how to do each task without having to ask people all the time. This binder has become his main support within his work environment. When his job plan wasn’t working, his team helped him with new ideas so that the job plan could work. His team assists in increasing his independence at work.

Rosa: Rosa is 20 years old and has a hearing loss and speech impediment. She has been employed at the airport as a ticket verifier for the last year. Her goal was to learn how to have a job, to have a good attitude at work, to become reliable, and to be independent. She also wanted to make some money and pay some bills. To be successful in her job, Rose



learned to talk slowly so people could understand her and also to ask people to speak louder so she could understand them. She learned a couple of unexpected things at her job. She learned that problems can arise. She began to feel that because of her disability she was being observed more critically than other employees. This resulted in her supervisor making negative reports to her manager. She realized that she could advocate for herself by talking with her supervisor and manager to find a solution to this problem. Through her experience at this job she realized that not just any job met her need for a career [a job she is interested in and wants to stay with for many years]. Now that she has had experience working and advocating, she has decided to get a certificate in Recreation in order to get a job doing work that is interesting to her. She is advocating for herself by continuing her education and beginning a new career.

Phillip: Phillip is 20 years old and has Cerebral Palsy (CP). He uses a wheelchair and has been working at the District Courthouse for 2 years. He delivers mail and orders to the judges within the courthouse. He works four days a week. He obtained his job through his high school program. He was originally supported only by a job coach. During this time the job coach mainly did everything for Phillip. She would take the mail out of each mailbox, label it, and place it on his wheelchairs tray table. She would then guide him to each judge's office and take the mail from the tray table and give it to the correct person. She would also push elevator buttons and open doors for him. He felt very dependent on her to do his job. His job plan was created by a team including himself, the employer, a judge, the job coach and the Occupational Therapist. Phillip's plan included making physical changes to his work environment to increase his ability to move throughout the courthouse. He was faced with many barriers. His barriers in the courthouse included: judge's mail boxes that were too high, elevator buttons that were difficult to push, doors that were difficult to open, elevator doors that closed too quickly, and materials and signs not available in Braille. All of these barriers were eventually changed or adapted when Phillip made his needs known. With his team, he advocated for changes to give him access. Phillip is now able to do his job independently. Some of the accommodations he advocated for and received were: a box that is secured to his wheelchair tray to hold mail already sorted into files, the doors to all judges chambers are propped open, and the elevator doors were retimed to allow for more open door time. Phillip has learned to press the elevator buttons. After expressing his needs and working with his team to get them addressed, Phillip no longer needs his job coach and is seeking other jobs within the courthouse.



How do you create a job plan and advocate for yourself at work?

1. Build a job support team. This could include teachers, occupational therapists, speech therapists and job coaches. It could also include friends or co-workers.
2. Talk to your employers about what you can do and what you might need to have changed or adjusted to make sure you are successful in your job. A good accommodation is one that makes sure you are successful in your job.
3. Talk to your employer and ask for the accommodations that you will need. Be clear from the start of your job about what you need.
4. Set an appointment time with your employer to discuss your job plan. Ask your support team to attend this meeting with you or to prepare you for the meeting.
5. Practice what you are going to say before the meeting.
6. Be on time to the meeting.
7. Don't forget that your employer wants you to succeed and needs your help to make that happen.
8. You can also advocate for new and challenging tasks at work and to resolve problems that may arise.

Resources for advocating for yourself at work

Many communities have organizations that specialize in working with individuals with disabilities. They offer services that may include employment support and advocacy. Many schools offer programs to assist high school students as they integrate into jobs, independent living and the community. Contact your high school. Ask your school to invite a vocation rehabilitation counselor* to your Individual education program meetings. You can seek support from disability organizations and other organizations that are able to assist you.

- **Job Accommodation Network**

- www.jan.wvu.edu

- This web site provides work site accommodation solutions. It also provides assistance regarding the ADA.

- **Legal information on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

- <http://thechp.syr.edu/lawman.htm>

- This is an article titled "Working and the Americans With Disabilities Act." It is for people with disabilities who want to learn about their employment rights.

- **Protection and Advocacy ("P&A")**

- www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/add/states/pas.html



P & A agencies are located in every state. This program provides advocacy services to people with disabilities. They can help advocate for a student's individualized program, work issues, or housing problems.

- **Diversity World**

www.diversityworld.com

- This web page shares resources, tips, and ways to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. DW has information on career development, scholarships and internships, information on job accommodations and access technology. DW links to Transition link, an on-line community for sharing ideas, strategies, resources, and information about the transition to life after high school for students with disabilities.

- **State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies**

www.trncwashdc.org/b007.html

This website will find your state's vocational rehabilitation office address, telephone number, website and e-mail address. Vocational rehabilitation can help find a job, provide a job coach and other accommodations in order for you to do your job.

*To learn more about Vocational Rehabilitation or what a vocational rehabilitation counselor is see the KASA document:

KASA What is Vocational Rehabilitation?