



Virtual Vision Technologies

www.VirtualVisionTech.com

Since 1991 Incorporated as Young Opportunities, Ltd

Workplace accessibility for people with disabilities
Access solutions that *work*.

Headquarters:
6 East Wayne Ave.
Aldan PA, 19018

Phone: (610) 734-0711
Fax: (484) 461-8724
National Woman Owned Small Business - CMA 4879

Access Learning Center:
9 South 69th Street
Upper Darby, PA 19082

The Employment Project - Lessons Learned

(A Historical Perspective – original source April 25, 2000)

“Some things change, some stay the same”

The 14 Lessons Learned discussed in this Appendix were documented in the year 2000, following a 3 year Employment Project designed to help blind and visually impaired job seekers secure a job in the mainstream workplace. Some things truly have come a long way, especially as they relate to the front end of the hiring process (see Lessons 5, 6 and 11, dealing with Employer awareness and the Bridge Phone Call). In general, the applicants disability need no longer be kept below the radar screen until a job interview is scheduled. Employers are more aware of Assistive Technology and its role in providing productive disabled employees.

On the other hand, many of the barriers connected to the applicant's struggle to cope with his disability (see Lessons 1-4) and his experience with the path through the rehabilitation system and long periods of unemployment (see Lessons 7-10 and 12-14) are as appropriate today as they were a decade or so ago.



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Lesson #1 — A sense of urgency

*Consumers need support and encouragement while a job lead is actively pursued.
Client feedback about search progress is essential.*

Expectation

Clients will respond immediately to available job leads.

Reality

Many clients have not worked in years. They are unsure of the level of assertiveness needed to pursue and follow-up on job leads, resumes, and interviews.

Result

Client delays pursuing a job lead; by the time a client responds, the job is gone.

Lesson Learned

Consumers need support and encouragement while a job lead is actively pursued.
Feedback from the client is necessary at every step of the search process.

Lesson #2 — Self-esteem

*Before beginning a job search, clients need help in dealing
with issues of low self-esteem related to blindness.*

Expectation

Clients have successfully adjusted to blindness, and possess the self-confidence to pursue a job search.

Reality

Many clients are still in the early stage of their adjustment to blindness.
Self-confidence is low.

Result

The client is hesitant to pursue job leads.

Lesson Learned

In order to prepare clients to enter the job search process, they need structured help to deal with issues of self-esteem, coping with loss, and other psychological and social adjustment to blindness.

Lesson #3 — Blindness is not the (primary) problem

If we want to help clients find jobs, we must first address the social, emotional, psychological, and physical problems that relate to blindness or vision loss.

Expectation

To support a client in a job search, the major (or only) issue we need to deal with is their blindness or vision loss.

Reality

Many clients have multiple problems that must be dealt with, including social isolation, lack of social skills, depression, dialysis, short-term memory loss, and lack of self-esteem.

Result

If these major issues related to blindness are not dealt with, and resolution formulated, before an intensive job search begins, it is unlikely that the client will ever find successful employment.

Lesson Learned

Any advocate or sponsoring agency working with the job seeker must be aware of and address all blindness-related client issues that are likely to impact a successful job search.

Lesson #4 — The Second Time Around

*A successful job placement is just the first step.
Long-term monitoring is necessary.*

Expectation

Once a successful placement is made, only periodic monitoring is required.

Reality

Many of our clients are entering the workplace for the first time in a long time. The workplace culture is not one they are familiar with, or necessarily comfortable with.

Result

Approximately 20% of the placements have ended in client resignation or termination within six months of hire. All but one of these clients has since been placed for the second time.

Lesson Learned

Successful placement is just the first step. Project planning must recognize and deal with the reality that clients need long-term follow-up and monitoring.

Lesson #5 — Employer Awareness

Employers don't understand blindness in the workplace. We need ongoing, direct dialogue between Project staff and employers.

Expectation

Providing employers with detailed information about the Employment Project's mission, goals and process will open an employer's doors to Project clients.

Reality

Most employers—whatever shape or size—know little about employing blind or visually impaired workers.

Result

Attempts to reach and engage employers are often unsuccessful.

Lesson Learned

To close the reality gap, we need extensive, ongoing, direct dialogue between Project staff and employers. We must pursue every opportunity to meet directly with employers—at job fairs, and especially at employer job sites.

Lesson #6 — Employer Advocacy

It is every bit as important to assure the employer that the Project advocates for employers as well as for employees.

Expectation

The Employment Project's advocacy role is to advocate with the employer for the client.

Reality

Most employers, of whatever shapes or size, know little about employing the blind and visually impaired. Since they are uncertain about what they should and must do, they find reasons to back away from the process. They need help (an advocate) to give them information and direction on how they can deal with and profit from this opportunity.

Result

The employer does not open up to the client, and the client does not get the job.

Lesson Learned

It is every bit as important to ensure the employer that the Project advocates for the employer as well as for the employee. This is especially true in the area of assessing what accommodations are needed and locating possible funding sources for the accommodations.

Lesson #7 — Staffing Agencies:

The project's time and energy are more profitably spent dealing directly with employers.

Expectation

Partnering with Staffing Agencies will provide benefits of established relationships with multiple employers and that temp-to-hire jobs would provide opportunity for client to demonstrate capabilities before employer commits to hire.

Reality

Staffing Agencies, in general, shield employer completely from the Employment Project. Staffing Agencies do not convey necessary message to employers about what is involved in hiring the blind and visually impaired. Staffing Agencies are hesitant to even connect the project in a three-way dialogue with the employer.

Result

Attempts were made to partner with four different Staffing Agencies, with varying degrees of connection. No successful placements were made.

Lesson Learned

The project's time and energy are more profitably spent dealing directly with employers, rather than through Staffing Agencies.

Lesson #8 — Involvement A to Z

Someone must ensure that constant communication is maintained between employer, REHABILITATION SYSTEM and service providers at every step of the process.

Expectation

Once a given step in the process has been completed or turned over to a responsible partner, the Employment Project involvement is complete.

Reality

Most employers know little or nothing about how the process should work or at what pace. Communication between employer, REHABILITATION SYSTEM and service providers needs constant coordination to work correctly.

Result

Equipment and/or services do not reach the workplace in a timely manner.

Lesson Learned

Someone must fill the communication gap or the process doesn't work.

Lesson #9 — Computer Training: Missing the Mark

Computer course completion should have an exit criteria directly related to workplace requirements

Expectation

Clients who attended computer training sessions at an authorized training center will complete training with a knowledge level appropriate for entering the workplace.

Reality

Clients were completing computer training successfully, but were still not prepared to take the competitive tests associated with job interviews. The clients knew the course topics but, in many cases, did not know how to put them together to accomplish a typical workplace oriented task (e.g., the creation, editing, merging and saving of a document. Nor were the clients capable, in many cases, of typing at 35 words per minute, the normal requirement.

Result

Many clients did not pass the interview test.

Lesson Learned

Course completion should have an exit criteria directly related to workplace requirements.

Lesson #10 -- Loaner Computers

A means must be found to provide students in computer training with equipment that can be used at home to reinforce their training.

Expectation

That clients who attended computer training courses would have the resources needed to complete that training successfully.

Reality

That attending training sessions faithfully once or twice a week is not sufficient. Unless the capability exists to practice and enhance the lessons learned, the knowledge is lost or vague by the time of the next session. As one client put it 'it's like trying to learn to cook without a stove'.

Most clients cannot afford to buy their own computer or assistive technology software and the state will not provide equipment until a job is at hand.

Result

Much of the value of the training is lost within a short period of time. Training time is prolonged because part of each session must be used to repeat material already covered.

Lesson Learned

A means must be found to provide students with equipment that can be used at home to reinforce training. The Employment Project has started a 'loaner computer' program to address this need.

Lesson #11 — The Bridge Phone Call

The interviewer must be contacted and be aware of the applicant's blindness before the interview occurs.

Expectation

A job interview with a blind applicant can be conducted like any other job interview.

Reality

An interviewer is invariably shocked when a person shows up for an interview and that is the first indication that the applicant is blind..

Result

The interview becomes an awkward one that does not address necessary issues

Lesson Learned

The interviewer must be contacted after the interview is scheduled, but before the interview is conducted. Our Employment Project offers to make this 'bridge phone call' as an advocate of both the client and the employer.

Lesson #12 —The Blind Leading the Blind

The importance of the clients viewing themselves as a networking group must be stressed early in the process and reemphasized often.

Expectation

Once a client is on the job search, their sole interaction is with the Employment Project.

Reality

Networking with the other Project clients starts during the Job Readiness Workshops and continues even after they are hired.

Result

Their successful job search and subsequent job performance opens the workplace door for other clients.

Lesson Learned

The importance of the clients viewing themselves as a networking group must be stressed early in the process and reemphasized often.

Lesson #13 — The Weakest Link

The job does not wait for the system to catch up to the job requirements.

Expectation

A major ally in the job acquisition process would be the rehabilitation system.

Reality

The system is often unable to react in the timeframe needed to provide equipment and job-related training when a client is hired. The time between job interview and hire/start date is usually measured in days or a week. The rehabilitation system also does not support key elements during the job search process, such as the availability of equipment to the client while the client is in training (see Loaner Computers).

Result

Ad hoc methods must be used to fill the gaps. This usually translates to the Employment Project providing loaner equipment (not always fulfilling job requirements) until the real equipment arrives. This approach can not work long-term

Lesson Learned

The job does not wait for the system to catch up to the job requirements.

Jobs are lost.

Lesson #14 — Where's the Priority?

Employment services must be raised to an equal priority level with traditional services at budget time to be successful.

Expectation

With the unemployment rate at greater than 70% among blind and visually impaired persons, employment would be a top priority in the blindness community.

Reality

Funding is always a problem in organizations that provide services to the blind and visually impaired. Funding, hence emphasis, is placed on traditional services and, if a cutback occurs employment services are often the first to be hit. This, despite the fact that employment services add clients and funding to the traditional services such as computer and O&M training.

Developers of assistive technology software are reluctant to test their products in a complex workplace environment, opting to concentrate on more targeted individual and training center environments.

Unless a conference is devoted exclusively to employment, which is rare, employment sessions are usually sparse on the agenda.

Result

Employment is still the 'new guy on the block' and is given a relatively low priority within the blindness community.

Lesson Learned

Employment services must be raised to an equal priority level with traditional services at budget time, or else employment projects cannot be successful.