



Coaches Can Help Job-Seekers with Disabilities

By [Katherine N. Barr, Esq.](#)

Only 17.8 percent of U.S. working age individuals with disabilities have jobs. For adults who have autism, a developmental disability that has skyrocketed in prevalence, the unemployment rate is 80% (*The Economist*, April 2016). On average, those with jobs only worked part-time and faced large pay gaps compared to the rest of the population. Careers are a gateway to independence for people with special needs and, clearly, more needs to be done to ensure that they have equal opportunities to participate in the workplace. In addition, 87 percent of customers prefer businesses who employ a diverse workforce.

Career services that support job seekers with disabilities are fragmented and differ significantly by location. All states, though, have a Vocational Rehabilitation Agency that provides counseling and other career assistance to individuals with special needs. They usually partner with local nonprofits to deliver programs, free of charge, to both high school students and adults. In some cases, though, they work with managed care organizations that charge a fee. Their services may also be paid for through a state's Medicaid waiver program.

It's best to start focusing on career issues as early as possible. Many parents do not understand that employment services through Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies are based on *eligibility*, as opposed to education services, which are based on *entitlement*. This shift in service provision can lead to a gap in services for students exiting high school. Vocational assessment and preparation should be part of each child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and parents should insist that schools coordinate their efforts with local job training agencies. Such services are staffed by *job coaches* or *employment specialists*, who provide individual counseling that ranges from short-term to many months.

While specifics vary, typical services include:

- evaluation of interests, capabilities and needed supports;
- career counseling to identify employment opportunities;
- instruction in specific skills, communications and workplace behavior;
- assistance with resumes, applications, interview techniques and other job-seeking skills;

- job placement;
- on-the-job coaching; and
- long-term support for the life of the job.

Some agencies actively work with potential employers to identify tasks that could be combined to create a position suitable for a specific applicant—a process referred to as *job carving*. Once an individual has been hired, a job coach may provide onsite training and support and to act as liaison with the employer until the individual has successfully adjusted. During this time, the job coach may provide assistance with skill acquisition, problem-solving, time management, co-worker and supervisor relations, and conflict resolution. For some individuals, this *supported employment* may be permanent.

Such services are in high demand and, given government budget constraints, there are often long waiting lists. In some states, priority is given to those with the most significant disabilities.

[Triumph Services](#) in Birmingham, Alabama, is a great example of effective job coaching at work. Over 80 percent of the individuals with developmental disabilities who pass through Triumph’s program get jobs! Funded by Alabama’s Department of Rehabilitation Services, Triumph provides skills assessments, job development and coaching, and long-term support.

After identifying potential employers, Triumph’s employment specialists role play with applicants, then accompany them to interviews to assist them in asking and responding to questions. Once the individual has landed a job, coaches provide one-to-one support, including help developing work relationships and natural supports in the work environment, handling confrontations and solving problems. They also educate employers on how to provide appropriate accommodations.

Once the individual has worked independently for 90 days, Alabama considers them “rehabilitated,” and a small fee—depending upon ability to pay—may be charged for ongoing check-ins by email, phone or in person.

Misconceptions abound concerning the employment of individuals with special needs. Many people fear that exploring career options will disqualify them for needs-based public benefits—such as supplemental Security Income and Medicaid—on which they depend. In reality, there are [numerous programs designed to protect their eligibility](#) while they explore the job market. Social Security’s Ticket to Work is an example. When afforded the opportunity, employees with disabilities have proven time and again that they possess the

talent and commitment to make a real difference in the workplace. Everyone benefits when they get that chance.

About this Article: *We hope you find this article informative, but it is not legal advice. You should consult your own attorney, who can review your specific situation and account for variations in state law and local practices. Laws and regulations are constantly changing, so the longer it has been since an article was written, the greater the likelihood that the article might be out of date. SNA members focus on this complex, evolving area of law. To locate a member in your state, visit [Find an Attorney](#).*

Requirements for Reproducing this Article: *The above article may be reprinted only if it appears unmodified, including both the author description above the title and the “About this Article” paragraph immediately following the article, accompanied by the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Special Needs Alliance – www.specialneedsalliance.org.” The article may not be reproduced online. Instead, references to it should link to it on the SNA website.*