



to Getting a Job

What Young People with Disabilities Need to Know

Work Ethic, Communication, & Problem-Solving

Soft Skills: The Competitive Edge

What do employers look for in new employees? According to the 2006 report *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce*, it may not be what some young job seekers expect. This in-depth survey of 461 business leaders conducted by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and Society for Human Resource Management reveals that while the three "R's" (reading, writing, and arithmetic) are still fundamental to every employee's ability to do the job, employers view "soft" skills as even more important to work readiness. The report also finds that younger workers frequently lack these skills, which include:

- Professionalism or work ethic
- Oral and written communication
- Teamwork and collaboration skills
- Critical thinking or problem-solving skills

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) discussed the importance of such skills with the Circle of Champions, a distinguished group of U.S. businesses that have received the Secretary of Labor's New Freedom Initiative Award for innovative and proactive efforts to recruit, hire, and promote people with disabilities. As part of this dialogue, the companies identified the following competencies as key to the success of young workers in the 21st Century workplace.



Networking

Simply put, networking involves talking with friends, family members, and acquaintances about your employment goals, interests, and desires. It also involves reaching out beyond people you already know in order to expand the opportunities that may be available to you. When it comes to finding a job, networking is essential. According to Cornell University's Career Center, 80 percent of available jobs are not advertised. Therefore, if you are not connecting with other people, you are likely to miss out on many job opportunities.

To start networking, make a list of everyone who may be able to help you job search. Next, talk to people on the list and tell them that you are looking for employment. Ask if they know of any openings and to introduce you if they do. But don't stop with the names on your list. Talk to cashiers, barbers, clergy, and anyone else you meet about their work and ask if they know of any jobs that match your interests. It is also essential to follow up with those with whom you have networked. Talking with a person once will only provide leads available at that point in time. But by establishing an ongoing relationship, you may learn of other opportunities as they arise.

Once you find a job, it is important to continue to network effectively. Through ongoing networking you can develop relationships with colleagues and increase your ability to move up in the organization.

Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is also essential to success. When interviewing, you are likely to stand out in an employer's mind if you show excitement about the job. Prior to the interview, check out the company's Web site to learn about the business. Think of questions you might want answered, because asking questions is one way to show interest. Other strategies include arriving a few minutes early to the interview, dressing professionally, and staying engaged in the conversation. You should also bring a pad and pen so you can take notes during the interview; just make sure to ask if it is okay to take notes first. This shows the interviewer that you are actively engaged and paying close attention to what they are saying.

It may also make it easier for you to think of additional questions to ask prior to accepting a job offer.

Once employed, continue to demonstrate enthusiasm by taking initiative and seeking new and more challenging work. In some work settings, this may mean performing tasks needing to be done before being asked. In a restaurant, for instance, in between meal rushes, a server might show initiative by wiping off dirty menus or filling salt and pepper shakers. In other work settings, you can show initiative by volunteering to take on needed work or pitching a new project idea to your supervisor. If he or she likes the idea, offer to do more research and follow up with him or her. This provides you with some ownership of the project and shows your commitment to the company.

Professionalism

Make sure your resume is "dressed to impress." Having an organized resume is essential to making a positive first impression. A good tip is to have a college professor or a career counselor read your resume and recommend edits before you submit it to a potential employer.

Once you have been called for an interview, it is important to research the company and find out more about your potential job responsibilities. This will not only allow you to ask better questions during your interview, but also ensure you are well-informed should the company make you an offer.

Business etiquette and work ethic go hand in hand for employers. Some tips when it comes to making a good impression once employed include:

- Dressing properly for the work setting
- Arriving on time and staying productive until you leave
- Turning cell phone ringers off while at work and returning phone calls and text messages while on breaks or after work hours
- Using computers, if you have access to them, only for work-related tasks
- Speaking in a respectful manner with supervisors, peers, and customers or clients



Also remember that even when you are technically “off-duty” in the lunchroom or at a reception, you are representing the organization and are expected to act professionally. Don’t contribute to office gossip or banter around too much with your co-workers. Although you are allowed to have fun and enjoy your job, you are still there to work.

Communication Skills

Communicating ideas in the workplace is different than in an academic setting. In a classroom, the instructor usually leads group discussions or assigns written homework, and students respond or ask questions when directed to do so. In the workplace, however, the format for interaction varies. Sometimes your supervisors may specifically ask you for your opinion or ask you to express that opinion in writing. More often than not, however, they assume that if they need to know something, you will bring it to their attention. The challenge of communicating in the workplace is learning how and when to share your ideas or concerns.

If you need to tell your supervisor about something that is not going well, it is important to remember that both timing and your attitude are extremely important. For example, if you are a cashier at a carry-out restaurant and the long lines during the lunch rush “stress you out,” causing you to give customers incorrect change, it is best to wait to talk to your supervisor about the problem during a slower period. At an appropriate time, you may want to ask if it would be possible to have someone assist you during busy periods. And if you are able to explain that this would not only allow you to make fewer mistakes, but also allow the business to provide better service by making the line move more quickly, he or she will be more likely to take your ideas seriously. Another proactive strategy would be to talk to your supervisor or another senior employee about how you could do your job more efficiently.

Listening is also an important communication skill. Employers report that the average entry-level candidate struggles with knowing how to listen carefully. They may not immediately process essential instructions or be able to understand how their tasks relate to the overall goals

of the organization. One way to improve your listening comprehension skills is to ask questions. Other tactics include restating what you thought you heard to confirm you understood correctly, and taking notes.

Teamwork

Successful businesses rely on team players. This skill is so important that an article in a Society for Human Resource Management magazine encourages employers to include teamwork as part of the performance appraisal process if collaboration is essential to the job. Understanding how to act as a member of a team may begin when you play sports or work on group projects in school. In the workplace, knowing how and when to lead and follow takes practice, as does knowing how to avoid unnecessary conflict. Working on a team also allows you to build closer relationships with your co-workers, which can make any job more fun and interesting. When working on a team, make sure that the workload is shared and that everyone is communicating. While some competition between team members is healthy and contributes to productivity, too much negative personal interaction can have the opposite effect.

Problem Solving and Critical Thinking

Problem solving and critical thinking refers to the ability to use knowledge, facts, and data to effectively solve workplace problems. As a new employee, you may question why an organization follows certain steps to complete a task. It may seem to you that one of the steps could be eliminated saving time, effort, and money. But you may be hesitant to voice your opinion. Don’t be; employers are usually appreciative when new employees are able to offer insight and fresh perspective into better and more efficient ways of doing things. It is important to remember, however, that as someone new to the organization, you may not always have the full picture, and thus there may be factors you are unaware of that dictate that things be done a particular way. Another important thing to remember is that when you are tasked with solving a problem, you don’t always need to answer immediately. The ability to develop a well thought out solution within a reasonable time frame, however, is a skill employers value greatly.

Resources

The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities

http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&Publications/411.html This publication, designed for youth and the adults who work with them, helps young people make informed decisions about whether or not to disclose their disability and understand how that decision may impact their education, employment, and social outcomes.

Improving Demand-Driven Services and Performance: Toolkit For Effective Front-line Services to Youth

http://www.doleta.gov/youth_services/Toolkit-improve.cfm This toolkit contains numerous worksheets to assist youth in figuring out how to address their career goals and to develop soft skills.

MonsterTRAK: Measure Your Soft Skills Smarts

<http://content.monstertrak.monster.com/resources/archive/jobhunt/softskills/> This Web site contains a short self-assessment youth can use to rate their soft skills.

National Youth Leadership Network

<http://www.nyln.org> The National Youth Leadership Network is a youth-led organization creating opportunities for youth with disabilities to gain leadership skills and network with each other.

Social Skills: Finding Friends and Persuading People

http://www.addresources.org/article_social_skills_brown.php?menu_off=true This document, geared to young people, provides useful strategies for developing the soft skills needed in the workplace.

Youth, Disclosure, and the Workplace: Why, When, What, and How

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/ydw.htm>

This fact sheet targeting young people with disabilities provides information about disclosure in the workplace.

Youth Information, Training and Resource Centers

<http://www.addyic.org> Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families and Administration on Developmental Disabilities, these resource centers work to increase the ability of individuals with developmental disabilities to exercise greater choice and self-determination and engage in leadership activities in their communities.

Youthwork Information Brief No. 20: Work Readiness Skills

<http://ohioworkforce411.gov/docs/youth/info-brief20-WorkReadinessSkills.pdf> Sponsored by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, this information brief describes soft skills that youth need and employers are looking for to gain a competitive advantage.

References

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