

# practice brief

## Employer Preferences in Hiring Youth with Disabilities

Almost all youth, regardless of disability, want to work. And almost all can work if they are exposed to the opportunity and if they receive the necessary support. This fact is bolstered by research that shows that work experiences, especially paid work, are key predictors of successful adult employment success for youth in transition (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012; Gold, Fabian & Luecking, 2013). In fact, effective secondary education and transition programs are those that feature work experiences as a key component of the service (Luecking, 2009). In other words, work is both an essential transition intervention and an optimum transition outcome.

However, successful engagement of youth in the workplace only happens when employers are willing to offer these opportunities to them. Therefore, one of the most important skills of transition professionals is the ability to engage employers in this endeavor. How do employers regard youth with disabilities and those transition professionals who support these youth in their pursuit of work experiences? What do employers expect when they agree to host youth for work experiences or to hire them for jobs in their companies? What are the implications of these perspectives for effective transition practice?

This brief presents recent research designed to answer these questions and discusses implications for increasing work experience opportunities and improving employment outcomes for youth in transition.

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## what the research tells us

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One national survey conducted for the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (Domzal, Houtenville & Sharma, 2008) of a nationally representative sample of businesses, identified several key themes related to employers expectations of disability employment programs. Among the most relevant to transition professionals included: (1) showing the added value of the applicant/employee to the organization, (2) documenting potential performance capacities, and (3) addressing the company's bottom line. Similarly, other studies have identified the importance of the job development professional demonstrating the added value employees with disabilities can offer the business (Ju, Roberts & Zhang, 2013; Simonsen, Fabian and Luecking, 2011).

In a recent study conducted by the Center on Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities (Simonsen, Fabian & Luecking, in press), researchers explored factors contributing to employer decisions to hire youth with disabilities who were participating in a national multi-site transition program called the Bridges from School to Work program (Bridges) administered by the Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities. The Bridges program conducts skill assessments, career planning, job development, placement, evaluation, and follow-up services to urban secondary students with disabilities in seven U.S. cities (Gold, et al., 2013). One hundred (100) employers of Bridges participants responded to a survey designed to measure information about the

company, the employer's perceptions of the hiring process and the role of the employment specialist.

The respondents indicated that the youths' "ability to perform the job" was the most important reason for hiring them. Interestingly, only a small percentage (3%) of respondents indicated that the most important reason for hiring the Bridges youth was to fill a current position. Larger companies were more inclined to say that confidence in the staff person representing the youth as the most important factor in hiring. Overall confidence in the employment specialist was important regardless of company size or whether the respondent was a direct supervisor or a company human resource specialist. The reputation of the agency (in this case, Bridges) was also an important factor in the hiring decision. Clearly, establishing a strong relationship with the employment specialist and the employment agency is highly valued by this sample.

The study also assessed additional factors that might contribute to the hiring decision, such as the companies' commitment to diversity, their desire to 'give back to the community,' or their perspective on expanding employment opportunities for all people with disabilities. While some of these factors were endorsed, particularly by smaller companies, they were considerably less important in the hiring decision than the reputation of the employment agency and the relationship established with the employment specialist.

## implications for practice

Three factors stand out from this research on Bridges employers. One, employers see successful engagement with youth employment programs as related to their confidence in the job development professional. Two, documenting the performance capacity of the job candidate in relation to the specific demands of the business is more important than filling vacant positions. And, three, hiring youth or individuals with disabilities as a way of “giving back to the community” is a less important factor in hiring decisions.

Overall, the survey suggests the following for employment specialists as they seek to effectively engage employers:

- Market the competent service of the professional or organization representing the job seeker
- Spend time visiting companies to learn how they operate and what they need
- Be prepared to identify specific benefits to the company offered by individual youth
- Look for opportunities to negotiate work tasks that are “customized” to individual youth and that meet a specific company need
- Avoid marketing appeals based on disability. That is, those that “sell disability” as a way of recruiting employers will not likely influence employer hiring behavior. In fact, promoting disability awareness is likely useful only in the context of other factors previously mentioned.

In general, employment specialists should be prepared to show how a youth job seeker will add value to the business’ bottom line, rather than how well the youth might fill an existing position. These findings also discredit the notion of using want ads and job opening postings as the primary or most effective ways to develop employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Rather, direct job developer contact and interaction with employers to learn of business operational needs are far more useful strategies.

## conclusions

Transition specialists play a critical role in helping youth with disabilities connect with employers in their communities. The success of these professionals to facilitate these connections is directly related to knowing what employers find most important in the hiring process. This demand-side approach will enable employment specialists to identify

and address business needs and demonstrate how the youth job seekers can help meet these needs. In the final analysis, effective transition professionals are those who are able to see things through the employers’ lens. This report provides additional support to the importance of this notion.

## references

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