



Research Summary

Vocational Rehabilitation Strategies to Enhance Early Career Development for Young People with Disabilities

At-a-Glance:

The choices young people make in their late teens and early twenties impact their earning potential and work opportunities for the rest of their lives. This study provides concrete strategies for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselors to better prepare young adults with disabilities to find, keep, and advance their employment.

Key Findings

Barriers to career advancement for a young person with a disability are:

- Lack of work experience in high school, as well as lack of self-confidence and limited work goals
- Not obtaining competitive employment directly after high school and not maintaining stable employment over time
- Insufficient access to ongoing training and support to gain skills and advance on the job
- Discrimination and prejudice in the workplace

VR Counselors can help youth with disabilities build a solid foundation of work experiences and skills that will increase their opportunities for high wage employment. Strategies to do this include helping youth develop their unique skills and abilities, broadening career exploration activities, developing work opportunities, giving opportunities for postsecondary education and training, preparing youth to grow in their jobs, and advocating for change in the workplace.

Putting It into Practice

Specific interventions include:

Help youth develop their unique skills and abilities

- Provide instruction in adaptability skills such as problem solving, goal setting, and time management
- Discuss disability awareness and accommodations that may be needed
- Teach and help youth practice proactive communication, self-advocacy, and self-determination skills

Broaden career exploration activities

- Help youth identify their unique strengths and interests, using self-assessment tools
- Give youth opportunities to engage in career exploration activities

Develop work opportunities

- Collaborate with education partners to provide school and community-based work experiences, as early as possible
- Carefully consider person-environment fit in job placement
- Focus on obtaining work that requires a higher skill level

Give opportunities for postsecondary education and training

- Explore options for postsecondary education and training
- Assist youth to complete required steps to apply and enter programs
- Encourage youth to use college disability supports and accommodations

Prepare youth to grow in their jobs

- Facilitate youth access to role models and mentors
- Recommend affinity and peer support groups
- Use assistive technology and other accommodations

Advocate for change in the workplace

- Inform employers of disability laws and policies
- Encourage employers to be inclusive in their hiring, retention, and promotion practices

Note: Many of these strategies will require collaboration with educators, agencies, and community employers.

More about this Research

Young adults with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed, under-employed, or living below the poverty line than their peers without disabilities. This article synthesizes research from the fields of vocational rehabilitation, counseling psychology, and special education to illustrate the early career development of young adults with disabilities. It focuses on their career development process and barriers to career advancement, and provides strategies to enhance early career development.

Learn More

Lindstrom, L., Kahn, L., & Lindsey, H. (2013). Navigating the early career years: Barriers and strategies for young adults with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 39, 1-2.