



DO·IT

**Career Development and
Students with Disabilities**

PRESENTATION AND RESOURCE MATERIALS

**Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.
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**Disabilities
Opportunities
Internetworking
Technology**

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A special thanks goes to the DO-IT Scholars, Pals, and Mentors who have taught us many times over to look at the unique abilities of every person. In the course of developing these materials, we asked them to share with career counselors, cooperative education and internship coordinators ideas for working with students, who, like themselves, have disabilities. Here are a few suggestions they, the real experts, shared on an Internet discussion list.

- From my point of view, a good career counselor has the following characteristics:
 1. The ability to work with people with different disabilities.
 2. The ability to generate options. Generating options is almost a necessity when dealing with students who like to know what is going on at a given time. They need time to evaluate the options and do what works best for them.
- There is one rule of thumb that I think all career counselors should follow: they should learn not to act on too many assumptions. Another thing that career counselors should be able to do is help students resolve problems in the work place. If a student has an internship somewhere and a problem occurs, the counselor should give the student a chance to talk over the problem and help the student find a solution. This may require meeting with the employer. Basically, I am making three main points:
 1. it does not pay off to act on assumptions,
 2. it is best to help students generate options for solving problems, and
 3. it is best to assist students as much as possible when solving job-related problems.
- I think that the biggest advice I'd give a career counselor working with people with disabilities is to consider the person's skills and then consider all the educational opportunities. My counselor at Vocational Rehabilitation kept suggesting that I get a technical degree in programming instead of going for a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science from the university. I decided to pursue the latter option.
- This is excellent advice! Too many counselors have low expectations for students with disabilities. They should consider all the education options and not assume that the shortest or easiest route is the best for a life-long career.
- I agree that the most important thing for a career counselor is not to limit the client's options and to encourage him/her.
- Make sure the employer and the employee have open communication and the employee can ask for accommodations if needed.



- I am a paraplegic and have been for 15 years. My first job was a training position where I went in just to see if I would like the job as Database Administrator. It may be tough to get employers to allow it and just as tough to get the disabled person to try a job without pay for a short time, but in my experience it was well worth it.
- A counselor working with a person with a disability should not confuse PLACEMENT with CAREER DEVELOPMENT. A significantly disabled person who is in a position where he/she is fully productive in the employer's view is probably under-employed in relation to his/her abilities and potential. I've observed this to happen often.
- I really like what you said: one of the most important principles is NOT to confuse placement with career development. People have to arrange to develop their careers (with appropriate help), and environments have to adapt to/learn where to use unusual skill package offerings. Once the two are combined, THEN they work symbiotically or mutually develop. Placement is one discrete action in a range of complex processes.
- The best advice I would give a career counselor would be for them to focus on the strengths of each individual. Do not focus on the disability. (As I know from personal experience, I am often judged by my physical disability.) I feel like no one knows I really am smart because they are looking at the outside not the inside.
- I would tell a career counselor working with a person with disabilities to impress on the client that a successful career will require continual adaptation and struggle. The client will need to inspire the active involvement of his/her employer in trying new accommodations and in allowing participation in new situations that may seem at first sight to be beyond the capability of the disabled person. Moreover, the client should be aware that some accommodations will not work out and some initiatives will lead to frustration. Networking and peer support will assist in finding the best paths for career development and in dealing with these setbacks.
- DO NOT ASSUME ANYTHING.



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