



UW Employment Training Program Fosters Opportunity

by Kris Freeman

“Wonderful!” That’s how Jonel Bloxham described the job he found through the University of Washington’s Employment Training Program (UWETP).

As one of the first employment programs in the nation designed to place and train adults with intellectual disabilities in employment opportunities, UWETP has more than 30 years experience developing mutually beneficial relationships between employers and persons with disabilities. Program clients are adults, ranging from 18 to 67 years of age, who have developmental and/or physical disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, multiple sclerosis, traumatic brain injury, or spinal cord injury.

UWETP employment specialists, counselors and staff help employers develop new jobs, place clients in existing jobs, provide or arrange job training and offer ongoing support once a client is established in a job. For example, with the assistance of his employment specialist Scott Heartfield, Bloxham applied and trained for the position of mail clerk at the Center on Human Development and Disability (CHDD).

“He’s such a good employee. We’re lucky to have him,” said Jonel’s supervisor Louise Muggli.

Bloxham, an Eagle Scout and graduate of Redmond High School, worked with Heartfield to inventory his strengths and develop employment goals. Bloxham’s strengths include computer and reading skills. He is also polite, punctual, self-motivated and works well with people. His previous work experience included time as a courtesy clerk at a grocery store, a job he found a little too hectic, as well as a warehouse assistant, retail assistant, and food-service worker.

Heartfield suggested that Bloxham apply for the job at the CHDD, and it’s worked out well. “I’ve met a lot of neat people. I have friends here,” said Bloxham, who sorts mail for the CHDD, delivers mail to several offices and handles package deliveries throughout CHDD buildings.

UWETP, which made its first successful placement in 1976, currently is working with 86 clients, with about 90 percent of them in jobs. Employers include the UW, law firms, city and county governments, grocery stores, restaurants, and libraries.

“While we have successfully placed people in a variety of settings, it is very difficult to find jobs for our clients right now, and a number have been laid off,” said Pat Brown, Ed.D., ETP director and a clinical associate professor of rehabilitation medicine. “It is a reflection of what is happening with the economy.”

In addition to placing clients in jobs, UWETP employment specialists also check in with their clients regularly to



Jonel Bloxham (left) is one of the UWETP’s clients who is currently employed at the CHDD. Jonel works in the mailroom and is being counseled by Scott Heartfield (right).

handle any questions or challenges. Clients receive anywhere from 3 to 18 hours of contact a month from the employment specialists, according to Brown.

UWETP operates under the auspices of the CHDD and the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine and serves as a contractor for the King County Division of Developmental Disabilities, Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and Washington State Department of Services for the Blind. Although other contractors in the state provide similar employment services, UWETP can offer a unique depth of experience.

"We've been in existence for so long that some clients who have been with us are now retiring," said Brown. During its long history, UWETP has evolved to offer more personalized services. "It used to be that you would look at a job first, not the abilities of the person you were placing. We've changed that," said Brown. "Now we look at the person and then figure out a good match or how to develop that match."

Because of this commitment to individual evaluation and counseling, the program has clients working in a wide range of jobs. "Some are doing data entry and web site design. Others are rolling silverware (placing a napkin around silverware for a restaurant) or crushing boxes," said Brown. "Our goal is to match someone to a job so that they can be independent."

Placing a client in a job where they can be independent might mean carving out a job, according to Susan Loggins, M.A., a UWETP employment specialist. "A person may not be able to do all aspects of a job, but they may be able to do parts of several jobs," she said.

"For many clients, the more concrete a task, the easier it is," added Peter Simonson, M.S.W., a UWETP employment specialist lead. Therefore, UWETP employment specialists look for employers who are willing to be flexible, taking aspects of several different jobs and combining them into one position.

Thanks in part to the outreach efforts by the UWETP staff, employers have learned that persons with disabilities can be excellent employees. "We know that people with disabilities want to work, are typically unemployed or underemployed at much higher rates than people without disabilities, but that once a good job match is made between the employee and the employer, people stay on the job and are major contributors," said Loggins.

"Now a lot of bigger companies go out of their way to hire people with disabilities," said Simonson. "They want their work force to reflect the community." For example, when a person with a disability comes to a grocery store to shop, they may feel more comfortable if they see store employees who also have disabilities. "It gives families a lot of hope to see other people with disabilities out there working," said Simonson.

UWETP continues to grow and respond to the changing needs of its clients and job markets. One new development is an internship program for high-school students to prepare them for future employment. Bloxham was one of the first student interns to graduate into paid employment. He said he would recommend the program to others.

Currently, another intern is working in a volunteer position with a nurse practitioner at the CHDD Child Development Clinic. The intern is helping with duties such as setting up exam rooms, re-stocking supplies and sterilizing rooms after exams. "We're creating an opportunity for a student to come in and try these different tasks and try this type of environment for a few months," said Brown.

The opportunity to create and nurture innovative opportunities like the CHDD internship is one of the most satisfying aspects of the job for UWETP employment specialists.

"I have a strong belief that every individual has the right to work or volunteer," said Loggins. "I think we all want to contribute to our community and our environment."

Several other new projects are in the works. Brown said UWETP is working with the UW's Autism Center to provide vocational consultation with adolescents who are about to graduate high school or college. In addition, the program hopes to work with UW students in disability studies or social work to take individuals with disabilities to cultural or sports events on campus. Once the concept is funded, UWETP would provide training and supervision for students in the program. Also UWETP is continuing its research around employment and barriers to employment and will begin a new pilot study funded by CHDD to understand vocational issues as they relate to autism.

Still, finding jobs for its clients is the primary mission of UWETP and any employer who is looking for hard-working employees can contact Brown at 206 543-6387 or pabrown@u.washington.edu.

CHDD is an interdisciplinary center dedicated to the prevention and amelioration of developmental disabilities through research, training, clinical service, and community outreach. CHDD includes the University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center.

CHDD Outlook

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