

From Intern to Skills Trainer: The Journey of One Individual to Competitive, Integrated Employment

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Academic Reader - Individuals with disabilities are employed at a rate approximately 40% lower than their counterparts without disabilities (Erickson et al., 2022). Research shows that there are significant benefits, for the individual and the business, to the hiring of individuals with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2018). Despite the documented benefits, individuals with disabilities continue to be underemployed. Using a case study design, the authors interviewed a young man who participated in the Project SEARCH employment training program for individuals with disabilities to get his perspective on the journey to competitive, integrated employment. The exploratory, qualitative case study was designed as a series of virtual interviews targeting the transition from a Project SEARCH intern to a full-time skills trainer working with new Project SEARCH interns (Yin, 2017). The authors identified four themes through the data analysis process which are described in detail as they relate to this young man's journey and the employability of people with disabilities.

General Public - People with disabilities are employed at a rate much lower than people without disabilities (Erickson et al., 2022). People with disabilities can be excellent employees who bring a wide range of skills and abilities to their work. Businesses may experience increased productivity and positive publicity as benefits to hiring people with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2018). Still, people with disabilities are underemployed in the workforce. The authors of this study spoke to one young man who participated in the Project SEARCH employment training program for people with disabilities. The young man shared the story of how he transitioned from being an intern to a full-time employee (Yin, 2017). The authors listened to recordings of the interviews to search for themes throughout. This paper highlights the story of one man's journey to employment in the hopes that it will shed light on the importance of this transition for other people with disabilities.

Keywords: Intern, Skills Trainer, Disabilities, Integrated Employment, Project SEARCH

INTRODUCTION

Engagement in meaningful employment enables the development of social networks and personal self-efficacy, provides a sense of belonging and security, and contributes to a person's health and quality of life (Dean et al., 2018; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). Transition to higher education and/or employment remain the primary indicators of positive outcomes within the American secondary education system (Daston et al., 2012), but many people with disabilities are unable to achieve this ideal due to various personal and system factors (Butterworth & Migliore, 2015). Individuals with disabilities are not averse to employment, in fact when surveyed a higher percentage of individuals with disabilities indicated an intention to find a paid job than individuals without disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2018). The lack of integration into the workplace is not evidence of lack of interest, but instead, a combination of multiple factors, including: (a) limited, evidence-based special education and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) practices; (b) misaligned federal policies; (c) poor employer awareness; (d) lack of accessible technology and transportation; and (e) inadequate career and professional development (Hall et al., 2013). Individuals with disabilities do not have the same opportunities and advantages of their fellow jobseekers without disabilities, which contributes to their underemployment in the American workforce.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals over the age of 16 *without* disabilities were employed at a rate of 67% in November 2021. Conversely, individuals *with* disabilities over the age of 16 were employed a rate of 23% at the same time point (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). These poor employment outcomes demonstrate that the non-discriminatory protections and policies included in the Rehabilitation Act (1973) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; 1990) are not realized in practice. In general, despite an increased focus on employment for people with disabilities (e.g., Employment First, Ticket to Work Program), the employment rates and wages of people with disabilities are persistently lower than their counterparts without disabilities (O'Neill & Houtenville, 2021). Yet, these numbers do not reflect the willingness of people with disabilities to search for and maintain competitive, integrated employment.

Benefits of Hiring People with Disabilities

Employers want employees who can perform their jobs well, are loyal, and bring a positive attitude to the workplace (Valentini et al., 2019). People with disabilities can be exceptional employees with the proper structure and support (Lindsay et al., 2018), yet some employers report barriers to hiring people with disabilities, which include inaccessibility in the hiring process, stigma, discrimination, the feared cost of potential job accommodations, and

poor fit between the strengths of a person with a disability and a job's demands (Bonaccio et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Wehman et al., 2018). Despite these perceived barriers, companies that hire individuals with disabilities benefit through improved profitability, competitive advantage, inclusive work culture, and ability awareness (Lindsay et al., 2018). The recruitment of people with disabilities opens a new stream of talent that may create retention in typically high-turnover, entry-level positions (Hartnett et al., 2011; Kalargyrou, 2014). Consumers are more inclined to frequent and spread positive information about companies that hire people with disabilities (Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Siperstein et al., 2006) and social expectations are likely helping to shape more inclusive recruitment and hiring practices (Moore et al., 2017). However, people with disabilities remain under employed when compared to individuals without disabilities.

Predictors of Employment Success

While it has long been recognized that successful transition is critical to improving post-school outcomes for young people with disabilities (Luecking & Gramlich, 2003; Mazzotti et al., 2016), many young people leave high school without the benefit of structured transition planning. Lacking appropriate preparation, these individuals often remain at home or employed in segregated settings, isolated from their communities, and dependent on government services (Lysaght et al., 2018). This scenario is avoidable, as it has been demonstrated that participating in work experience while in high school is a predictor for positive post-school outcomes related to employment (Carter et al., 2012; National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative [NTACT-C], 2021; Test et al., 2009). The most recent evidence from Mamun et al. (2018) estimated a positive effect of early work experience on later employment at 17 percentage points. While early work experience has been identified as a promising predictor (Mazzotti et al., 2021), not all individuals with disabilities have access to these types of experiences due to factors beyond their control.

Project SEARCH Model of Employment Training

Project SEARCH is an employment training program for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) that was established over twenty years ago at a large pediatric hospital in the Midwestern United States (Rutkowski et al., 2006). The hallmark of the Project SEARCH program is total immersion in the workplace (Daston et al., 2012). Interns experience three internships, each twelve weeks in length, within a local business. Interns learn marketable and transferrable skills while on the job and in the training room. This business-focused model facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and worksite-based training and support (Daston et al., 2012). The goal is for each program graduate to find competitive, integrated employment. Real-life work experience combined with training in

employability and independent living skills help people with disabilities make successful transitions from school to productive adult life (Mazzotti et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009).

There are now over 650 Project SEARCH sites in the United States and overseas. Each program site accepts between eight and twelve interns each year. Most Project SEARCH interns are high school students between the ages of 18-22 but about 20% of the Project SEARCH programs in the United States are adult programs that serve an older age range of interns. Since 2010, Project SEARCH has served about 34,000 young adults with IDD and maintains a post-completion employment rate around 75% (see Table 1 for detailed outcomes). Graduates employed after completing Project SEARCH between 2017-2019 maintained an average of 24 hours of work per week with an average wage of over \$10 per hour, which exceeds the federal minimum wage (Daston et al., 2019).

Table 1. 2017-2019 Project SEARCH Graduate Employment Outcomes

| | 2017-18 | 2018-19 |
|-------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| # Enrolled | 3733 | 4166 |
| # Completed | 3511 | 3868 |
| % Completed | 94% | 93% |
| # Employed | 2357 | 2907 |
| % Employed (All Jobs) | 77.3% | 75.2% |
| % Employed (Meet PS Criteria) | 67.1% | 65.2% |

Note. Data in Table 1 is from the Project SEARCH Annual Outcomes Report for the program years 2017-18 and 2018-19. Annual Outcomes Reports are compiled each year prior to the Project SEARCH Annual Conference. %Employed (Meeting PS Criteria) refers to graduates that gained employment in a job that pays the prevailing wage, is not seasonal, in an integrated setting, for at least 16 hours per week.

Rationale and Research Questions

The gap in employment levels between people with and without disabilities is well documented (O’Neill & Houtenville, 2021; Sevak et al., 2015) and there are national (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014) and state level (Association of People Supporting Employment First, 2022) policies that ensure individuals with disabilities are encouraged to seek competitive, integrated employment. Researchers have examined the employment disparities for people with disabilities from different angles, including their primary disability

diagnosis (Bush & Tassé, 2017), their race/ethnicity (Cameto et al., 2003; Newman et al., 2011), and gender (Brown & Moloney, 2019). Families (Gilson et al., 2018), adult care providers (Domin & Butterworth, 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2012) and special educators (Riesen et al., 2014) have been surveyed and interviewed to determine expectations and barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities.

More research is needed from the perspective of the job seeker, the individual with the disability (Migliore et al., 2007; Sundar et al., 2018; Wehman et al., 2018). Recent literature includes qualitative examinations into barriers and expectations for individuals with physical disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2021), autism (Sarrett, 2017), and mental health disorders (Lassman et al., 2015). However, many studies that qualitatively examine the experiences of job seekers with disabilities focus on barriers to employment (Jans et al., 2012) rather than the positive strategies used to find a job.

The authors of the current study used an exploratory approach to gain insights into the employment of individuals with disabilities through the eyes of a young jobseeker with a disability. The researchers used the following questions to guide the study: (1) What are the experiences of a young adult with a disability when seeking and maintaining competitive, integrated employment? (2) What interventions did the Project SEARCH instructor use to promote employability? And (3) How has employment impacted the life of the young adult with a disability?

METHODS

The authors used a case study design as an exploratory method to gain insight, through detailed descriptions and personal anecdotes, into one man's journey to competitive, integrated employment (Yin, 2017). Through purposeful selection of Project SEARCH graduates, the researchers identified one graduate as the subject of the current study, based on his employment as a skills trainer (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2017). The lead author is a researcher with the Project SEARCH National Team. In this role she has come to an in-depth understanding of the innerworkings of the Project SEARCH program and the annual employment outcomes of thousands of graduates with IDD. The research team is comprised of a Project SEARCH graduate who is now a skills trainer for the program, an undergraduate student at a university near the lead author, and the Project SEARCH instructor who currently works with the identified graduate (see Table 2 for more author details and roles).

Table 2. Author Roles

| Member | Role |
|---------------|---|
| Author 1 | Designed study, identified sample, contacted participants, prepared interview questions, interviewed participants, collected all data, created questionnaires, involved in all phases of data analysis, maintained correspondence with co-authors, prepared manuscript for final submission |
| Author 2 | Subject of case study, participated in virtual interviews, completed electronic questionnaire, reviewed thematic analysis, helped to draft and revise manuscript sections: participant, setting, findings, member-checked assumptions made |
| Author 3 | Undergraduate student, transcribed two interview sessions, participated in identification of themes during data analysis, reviewed literature and wrote introductory sections of manuscript |
| Author 4 | Project SEARCH instructor, participated in virtual interviews, responded to electronic questionnaire, helped to review thematic analysis, member-checked assumptions made |

Inclusion Criteria

Anecdotal records from Project SEARCH instructors around the United States led to a more robust search for program graduates who gained employment as skills trainers. An analysis of the Project SEARCH database led to the discovery that approximately 40 individuals that completed the program between 2017-2019 gained employment in the teaching/coaching sector. The Project SEARCH database does not currently have the ability to break down individual jobs at the aggregate level, so it was not possible to determine how many graduates were employed specifically as skills trainers.

The Project SEARCH community is wide and resourceful. The first author began contacting U.S. Project SEARCH Program Specialists to begin making connections to instructors. Program Specialists work for the National Project SEARCH office and work with teams around the country to establish and maintain new sites. This initial contact, via email, led to the identification of one young man currently employed as a skills trainer. This young man was chosen because: a) he had recently graduated from Project SEARCH, b) he found employment as a skills trainer, c) he was comfortable talking about his life and career, d) he identified as having an IDD, e) he had the availability in his work schedule to attend interviews and answer emails related to this study, and f) he was over the age of 18 and his own guardian.

Participant

Rashad is a co-author and the focus of the current study. Rashad is a young African American man in his mid-twenties who lives and works in the southern region of the United States. Doctors diagnosed Rashad with Asperger's Syndrome, which we now refer to as autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) when he was 21. Rashad received an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for speech concerns during his time in high school. He received targeted speech and language intervention only during high school. Rashad graduated on schedule with his peers, after four years.

Rashad's main goal in high school was to go to college to become a game designer. This changed while he was in college. He changed his course of study to art, but after taking a class in creative writing he wanted to pursue a career in that field. All the while he held several jobs, one as a stocker for a large U.S. retailer and then for a cleaning company. After a year and a half of college he left to find a better program that followed a curriculum that he thought would suit him better. Rashad was always interested in computers and started to develop an interest in data entry. Soon he found a Project SEARCH program near his home and learned they offered internships in data entry. Rashad applied, interviewed, and was accepted, and year later in 2019, he graduated from the program. Rashad earned a job as a skills trainer for the Project SEARCH program at a large University Medical Center in the southern United States.

Setting

Rashad participated in the Project SEARCH program during the 2018-19 academic year. The program typically lasts nine-ten months and follows a traditional academic calendar (August – June). The Project SEARCH program was in a large insurance company in the southern region of the United States. Rashad participated in three different internships, one in the Call Center, one in the Long-Term Services and Supports Department, and the third in the Operations Center. When not on his internship, Rashad spent time in the Project SEARCH training room, also in the insurance company. The two interviews conducted for the purpose of this study took place virtually, via the Zoom platform.

Intervention

The fourth author, who is Project SEARCH instructor, used the Project SEARCH employability curriculum paired with hands-on learning and constructive feedback to support Rashad as an intern. Project SEARCH instructors from around the country have partnered with national staff to develop an employability curriculum that is used by program sites around the world. Interns learn about topics such as: team building, workplace safety, technology, self-advocacy, maintaining employment, financial literacy, health and wellness, preparation for employment, and social communication during their hour of

classroom time each day. Each Project SEARCH instructor has the autonomy to use the curriculum how it best suits their interns and schedule.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a series of two virtual interviews between the first author, Rashad, and the Project SEARCH instructor. Both interviews were approximately an hour in length. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographic distance between the first author and interviewees, a virtual Zoom format was considered the most convenient and safe meeting method. The first author scheduled each interview in advance to accommodate the schedule of the interviewees and sent an email containing a Zoom link for the virtual meeting. The first author, Rashad, and instructor attended the first virtual meeting. Rashad and the first author attended the second interview. The interviewees granted permission for the first author to record the sessions. The first author started each session with a set of prepared questions and took copious notes throughout (see Table 3 for interview questions). The interviewer asked interviewees to share any additional information at the conclusion of each session.

Table 3. Prepared Interview Questions

| Session | Question |
|---------|--|
| 1 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="307 892 1003 951">1. Tell me a little bit about yourself, like your age, your gender, your background, what you like to do. <li data-bbox="307 965 666 991">2. Where do you currently live? <li data-bbox="307 1012 830 1038">3. How do you get to and from work each day? <li data-bbox="307 1058 931 1173">4. What can you tell me about your disability and how it impacts you during your work? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="365 1116 818 1142">• Do you require any accommodations? <li data-bbox="365 1144 919 1170">• Do you know how to request accommodations? <li data-bbox="307 1190 976 1333">5. Can you tell me about your experience with Project SEARCH? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="365 1248 976 1333">• For example: when did you go through the program? What were your internship locations during your program year? <li data-bbox="307 1350 994 1409">6. How did your instructor and your skills trainers prepare you for employment while you were in Project SEARCH? <li data-bbox="307 1426 973 1482">7. How did mentors within your internship departments help you? |

8. What were the most valuable things you did during your time in Project SEARCH?
 - Which activities do you think helped you the most with getting a job?
9. Would you recommend the program for other young adults?
10. Tell me a bit about your current job.
 - Where are you working?
 - How long have you been working in your job?
11. Tell me about your responsibilities at your job?
 - Hours?
 - How many interns do you manage?
 - What skills do you need to have to perform your job successfully?
12. How confident do you feel at your job? Who do you go to if you have questions or concerns?
13. Do you receive benefits at your job?
14. Did you have a formal interview when you applied for your job?
 - How prepared did you feel for this?
15. Are you happy at your job?
16. What do you like the most about having a job?

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1. Tell me about how classroom time with your instructor helped you to be a better employee?
 2. What was your favorite/best subject in school?
 3. What was a subject in school that was difficult for you?
 4. How do you use reading, math, and writing in your job as a skills trainer?
 5. What is your biggest improvement since graduating Project SEARCH and getting a job as a skills trainer?
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The lead author sent an individualized follow-up questionnaire to both interviewees and one of Rashad's supervisors via email. The research team requested additional information to describe Rashad's journey from multiple lenses and to fill in any gaps in information uncovered after the first round of analysis. Virtual interviews, while convenient, do limit the scope by which an outside observer can fully understand the environment and background of a study subject (Cater, 2011; Gray et al., 2020). Participants returned completed questionnaires via email to the first author (see Table 4 for questionnaires).

Table 4. Individual Questionnaires

| Participant | Questionnaire |
|---|--|
| Rashad (second author) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What were your goals in high school versus now? Have your goals changed since your participation in Project SEARCH? 2. How has your life changed since gaining employment as a skills trainer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel like you are in a career now? • Do you feel like you are content, or would you like to keep exploring more possibilities? 3. Provide any additional details about your life at home. |
| Project SEARCH Instructor (fourth author) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What made Rashad a viable candidate for the skills trainer role? 2. How has Rashad changed since entering the Project SEARCH program? 3. Describe Rashad’s transition into a leadership role, which includes training, entering data, making decisions, and mentoring new interns. 4. Discuss Rashad’s work ethic/performance. |
| Rashad’s Supervisor | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you learn that Rashad was interested in employment as a skills trainer? 2. How prepared was he for his interview? 3. What qualities did your agency see in Rashad that made you want to hire him? 4. How has Rashad grown over the past several years? 5. What leadership qualities do you see in Rashad? 6. What would you say are Rashad’s strongest attributes on the job? |

Data Analysis

The research team completed data analysis in a series of three phases. The first author began phase one of analysis by reviewing interview notes and recorded interview sessions. Due to the small number of sessions, the researchers sampled both recorded interviews in their entirety. The first author emailed

Rashad and the Project SEARCH instructor to determine if they wanted to include any additional information to provide a true and detailed description of the Project SEARCH method of employment training and Rashad's journey to employment (Stake, 1995). Rashad and the instructor shared additional information which the first author included in the analysis.

During the second phase of analysis, an undergraduate student at a university near the first author transcribed the two recorded sessions verbatim. The first author coded these transcriptions descriptively, in terms of the interviewee's responses related to employment. After reviewing descriptive results, the first author identified three themes that came from the first round of coding. Next, the first author used topic coding to organize data into thematic units (Richards and Morse, 2013). The coding process was iterative; the authors revisited data as necessary to understand and connect new information (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

During the third phase, the entire team discussed themes to determine if all authors were in agreement. The team members noted a fourth common theme of resiliency (a leadership quality) which they incorporated into the final analysis. Member checking of data occurred among interviewees. Research team members discussed findings until they reached a mutual agreement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The first author solicited additional information from the original participants and one of Rashad's supervisors via individualized questionnaires (see Table 4). The team analyzed the completed responses using the same three-phased approach used above.

FINDINGS

Rashad is a determined, industrious individual who set his mind to a career path and did research to find a training program that fit his needs. Throughout the course of the interviews and during subsequent data analysis four important themes emerged. The research team worked to describe, organize, and identify themes as they related to Rashad's journey to employment. The authors identified four themes: (1) skills that Rashad possessed before Project SEARCH, (2) skills he gained during Project SEARCH, (3) skills required for competitive, integrated employment, and (4) Rashad's leadership qualities. The following sections will discuss these themes in more detail (see Table 5 for quotes organized by theme).

Skills Already Possessed

While in high school, Rashad switched between schools in the southern and eastern United States. Rashad reported that he was an "average student in most subjects, but below average in mathematics." He enjoyed learning about history, reading, and attending art class. It was after high school that Rashad be-

came interested in writing science fiction stories. Math was difficult for Rashad, and he even describe it as a “foreign language to him.”

Rashad said that he was a strong reader and an occasional writer. In high school he participated in all classes with his peers and was “pulled out” for individual speech therapy. Rashad was very independent in high school and navigated through his courses without much support from his instructors. Rashad shared that he was, and still is, “very organized and great with time management.” He was always punctual during high school and utilized a schedule throughout the day. Rashad did report that he had some trouble with socialization.

Rashad graduated high school and started looking for a job right away. Rashad had the skills necessary to research jobs, interview, and gain employment. He held several jobs before he started Project SEARCH in the retail and cleaning/maintenance job sectors. Rashad knew that he was not working to his potential, and he wanted a job where he could use all his skills.

Skills Learned during Project SEARCH

Rashad immersed himself completely in the culture of the business after his orientation to the program. He rotated through three internships over the course of the year. Rashad’s internships were quite different from each other, providing an opportunity for Rashad to learn a variety of marketable skills. He started in the National Call Center where he did data entry and customer service work. Next, he moved to Long Term Services and Supports, where he did clerical work, such as sorting, filing, printing, and mailing. Finally, he finished with data entry in the Operations Center, which was the internship he enjoyed the most.

Rashad’s instructor taught the interns the importance of time management, punctuality, professional dress, how to ask a coworker for help, and how to keep important documents organized and secure. Even though Rashad was already a highly organized and punctual person, he learned some specific techniques from his instructor that he was able to utilize on the job. He said that “when helping the interns practice for an interview, being organized is very important.” Rashad found the most valuable lessons learned to be “taking notes – someone taught me how to take notes during meetings so I would remember what was said,” and “writing down definitions or steps of a process I was unsure of.” Rashad was nervous at first, but he was inspired by the way his instructor taught him, so he used that as his guide. He gained confidence by watching his instructor and he learned that if he treated everyday as a “presentation” then he was less nervous about teaching the new interns.

Skills Required for Competitive, Integrated Employment

Being a skills trainer requires a very niche set of skills, including the ability to communicate effectively and efficiently, teach skills, and provide accom-

modations “on the fly.” Rashad did not come to Project SEARCH with these skills honed, he had to work on them continuously, and still does. Rashad was already a strong reader, but more a reader for pleasure. When he started his work as a skills trainer, he had to read emails, to-do lists, and training documents. Rashad felt that the transition from reading for pleasure to reading for purpose was not a difficult one, but he did add that “because of Project SEARCH he knows who to ask if he is struggling with a new piece of information.”

Prior to Project SEARCH, Rashad described himself as an “average writer.” He enjoyed writing science fiction and horror pieces for pleasure. As a skills trainer, Rashad writes daily. He writes reminders, lists, and progress notes for all Project SEARCH interns he supervises. He keeps notes of any issues or questions that arise when he is making rounds to visit interns. Rashad “uses these notes as discussion points for his daily check-ins” with the Project SEARCH instructor. Rashad also uses his writing skills to create lists or schedules for interns to use while they are on the job.

Rashad shared that math was his least favorite subject in school. He felt that basic and functional mathematics made sense to him, but he felt confused when he entered algebra class. Initially when asked how he used math in his job, he was not sure. After some strategic questioning, Rashad realized that he uses math quite a bit during his daily routines without even realizing it. Rashad helps with travel planning and scheduling which requires knowledge of distance and time estimation. Rashad is also responsible for entering intern data into the Project SEARCH database. Rashad often helps the Project SEARCH instructor with financial literacy lesson delivery, which includes teaching interns how to make and balance a budget, plan for payroll deductions, and write checks. Rashad said “time management and quick on the spot math are very important topics” he still uses that he learned from his instructor while in Project SEARCH as an intern.

Leadership Qualities

Rashad’s supervisor described him as a person who “earns and gives respect, shows patience and empathy to each person, is accountable and encourages others to be, and not only makes steps for his own growth, but also holds others accountable so they reach their potential.” Rashad stated that he often “put himself in the interns’ shoes and reminded himself of his time as an intern” so that he could better understand what they were thinking and feeling to make a better connection with them and form a good professional relationship. His former Project SEARCH instructor shared that Rashad “is an excellent skills trainer with the abilities to coach, teach, collaborate, advocate, build relationships, and become a champion for all individuals participating in the program.”

Rashad carved his own path to employment by remaining resilient and exploring new roads. He feels empowered by his daily work with the interns and remembers his own personal goals when he witnesses their triumphs. He said that “my goal of becoming a writer of fiction hasn’t changed and I plan on going back to school this year to study creative writing.” Rashad’s previous instructor stated that “Rashad strives for excellence in everything he does and is a role model for all employees at the Medical Center campus.”

Table 5. Interview Themes

| Theme | Corresponding Quote from Interview or Questionnaire |
|---|--|
| Theme 1: Skills already possessed | <p>“I would say time management, I was always, for example, when it came to this meeting, I would plan stuff like I would put that first and I would plan stuff in my head like trying to get to Zoom five minutes before the meeting even started.” - Rashad</p> <p>“...with organization, I always create folders that I keep personally, always write stuff down, make a bookmark of them that way I can find them more easily...” - Rashad</p> |
| Theme 2: Skills learned during Project SEARCH | <p>“What it did for me... (Project SEARCH) basically it helped me learn, process data entry, experience working on the computer, helped me working in the, helped me prepare in an office type environment.” - Rashad</p> <p>“I mean it not only helped me with office skills, it helped me succeed in the workforce in general. It helped me with skills I need to know that would help me have a successful future.” - Rashad</p> |
| Theme 3: Skills required for competitive, integrated employment | <p>“I would say taking notes during meeting was valuable. So, I will be writing on the paper pad I had with me, especially when I wasn’t sure about something I would write down a description of it...” - Rashad</p> <p>“He is now able to comfortably communicate with interns and families about services...set up new internships, meeting with mentors and managers, publicly speaking about Project SEARCH, and even leading some instructional class time.” – Project SEARCH instructor</p> |

Theme 4:
Leadership
Qualities

“I also wanted to brag on Rashad because he does a lot of extra things for us.... He does so many extra things which is cool, and he is a wonderful public speaker. We use Rashad a lot for his knowledge to teach our interns about public speaking.” – Project SEARCH instructor

“I do feel that my time as a job coach of the program has helped inspire me to work to obtain the career and life that I want to create for myself.” – Rashad

“...when this idea [of becoming a skills trainer] was first presented to Rashad, I believe he wasn’t quite sure how he felt about it. However, he had the opportunity to do some shadowing and learn the job responsibilities and communicated that he would love to work as a skills trainer. Since then, Rashad hasn’t looked back!” – Project SEARCH instructor

“Rashad is certainly a leader within our team... I completely trust his judgement and decision-making on the job. Rashad has full autonomy to make any coaching decision or to implement any aids or assistance on the job site.” – Project SEARCH instructor

DISCUSSION

The findings of our exploratory analysis suggest that the Project SEARCH model of employment preparation helped Rashad gain and maintain marketable and transferable employability skills which enhanced his ability to secure competitive, integrated employment. The blend of direct instruction with total workplace immersion seemed to be beneficial for Rashad as he successfully completed three internships within a large insurance company and later accepted a job as a skills trainer at a University Medical Center. This is all in addition to Rashad’s dedication and strong support system.

Implications for Project SEARCH Staff

Rashad’s Project SEARCH instructor and skills trainers assessed his skills prior to entry into the program to establish appropriate internships based on Rashad’s abilities. At the beginning of a new internship, the skills trainers and instructors are much more “present” in the internship department, introducing them to co-workers in the department, teaching the steps required for task completion, and providing accommodations as needed. Once the intern has a firm grasp on their expectations and can independently complete the work, the instructor and skills trainers pull back on their intervention measures. Rashad blossomed under this model of employment training. He enjoyed meeting new co-workers and working through situations on his own, knowing he had the additional support of the Project SEARCH staff.

Rashad can navigate the shuttle system at the Medical Center independently and can now teach that process to the interns he supports. Rashad has gained so much confidence through this process that he has spoken at several statewide conferences on his employment as a skills trainer and his work with the Project SEARCH database and VocFit systematic job matching tool (Persch et al., 2015). Rashad's story should encourage Project SEARCH staff to empower interns to reach their full potential. Instructors should match interns with internships that will push them out of their comfort zones and prompt them to strive for more. All staff should hold high expectations for interns regardless of their skill level at program entry.

Implications for Jobseekers

Rashad graduated high school a young man eager and willing to tackle any job. He found employment on his own but did not feel that he was fulfilling his potential. When asked if he was happy in his current job as a skills trainer, he answered with a resounding, "of course!" Rashad reports that when he goes to work, "it's like being with a second family." He enjoys forming relationships with people he works with and likes getting to know new people as they join the team. Rashad arrives at work about an hour early to prepare for the day, he schedules a driving service each week to get him to and from work, and he contributes to his family's household expenses. Through hard work and determination, Rashad found a job that he loves that is competitive, integrated, and uses all his skills.

Current and future jobseekers can take note of Rashad's resiliency and resourcefulness throughout his job search. Whether searching independently, with family, or with the support of an agency, young adults should remember the importance of finding a "good fit." Young adults should get involved in their transition planning at an early age to make their opinions known. Researching jobs and trying new things are major take-aways from Rashad's story.

Implications for Educators and Families

While the authors did not interview Rashad's family, Rashad was able to anecdotally provide information about his home where he enjoys a "quiet life with his mother in their apartment." Rashad's mother has long been a supporter of his independence, encouraging him to pursue pathways that made him happy. Rashad now shares responsibilities, such as bill payment, meal preparation, and daily cleaning, with his mother. The strong familial support is something that Rashad values very highly and names as a reason for his success.

Rashad's Project SEARCH instructor shared that "Rashad's work ethic is nothing short of exemplary." He points out that Rashad's successes are his own and that he, as the instructor, was there as support. It is through this style of supportive teaching, that Rashad was able to blossom into the independent and successful employee he is today. Educators can still be "major contributors"

to intern success later in life, even though their role may not be in the forefront of the classroom.

Implications for Employers

Finally, employers can also gain helpful insights from the current case study. Rashad was able to seek out, apply for, interview, and gain employment at certain agencies due to their person-centered and inclusive hiring practices. Rashad's supervisor keeps communication open between the Project SEARCH program and the rehabilitation agency so that she can seek out new talent. Rashad learned of a new skills trainer position at the Medical Center and reached out to his current supervisor for more information. He applied for the position and was one of the candidates invited to interview for the position. After his interview, the supervisor said, "there was no question in my mind that Rashad would be the one to hire."

Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of this exploratory study are promising, though several limitations should be considered. Since this was a case study design, only one individual was able to share the story of their employment journey. Future studies should consider soliciting the feedback of a larger number of individuals with disabilities, their instructors, and families to determine if other individuals had similar or different experiences with employment. The design of this study does not lend itself to generalizability, but it does offer a deeper understanding of the experience of one individual (Carminati, 2018; Polit & Beck, 2010). Given the current push for competitive, integrated employment for all, more studies that highlight the experiences of individuals with disabilities as they prepare and search for careers, are warranted.

This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic which made in-person observation or interviewing impossible. Virtual interviews and emailed questionnaires solicited the necessary information but without the richness typically paramount in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The authors of the current study intend to conduct further studies to examine the transition from Project SEARCH intern to skills trainer. Future studies should strive to include in-person data collection procedures and observations within the natural environment.

CONCLUSION

Employment is nature's medicine, a way of creating order and meaning in our lives. It is also an indicator of increased quality of life, including better health and happiness overall (Robertson et al., 2019). As an individual with a disability, Rashad could have been overlooked for competitive employment, but through his resiliency and connection to strong supporters he was able to secure a job that brings out his leadership qualities and encourages him to pursue his dreams.

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