

# Holding Engaging Conversations About Work

## *Work Experience Guide*<sup>1</sup>

Minnesota Department of Human Services  
2016 Informed Choice for Employment

### What is Work Experience?

Work Experience is an effective approach to help people prepare for employment through a coordinated set of activities that take place in community businesses instead of in school settings or other specialized facilities.

Work experiences are designed to be outcome-oriented, meaning that the activities and experiences are intended to advance job seekers along their individualized Paths to Community Employment. The ultimate goal of work experience is to prepare and support each person to obtain and be successful in competitive, integrated employment.

Through work experience, youth age 14 or older and adults engage in career exploration, career assessment, and work-related training to help them identify their interests, strengths, skills, training and support needs, and ideal conditions for employment.

This is accomplished through a variety of targeted activities such as informational interviews, job shadows, short term hands on activities, apprenticeships and internships, and volunteer experiences.

Key Characteristics of Work Experiences are:

- ✓ **Learning focused**- the job seeker is learning about different jobs in the community, different work skills while the support professional is learning about the job seekers strengths, interests and ideal working conditions.
- ✓ **Person Centered**- the job seeker's known interests and emerging skills influence the experience selection
- ✓ **Time limited**- the experience is short term
- ✓ **Authentic**- the experience involves doing real activities where they are typically done with people who typically do them.
- ✓ **Individualized**- or a combination of some individualized experience and some small group experience
- ✓ **Paid or Unpaid**- may sometimes include paid work, such as summer youth experience, or community based assessment, but are often unpaid

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<sup>1</sup> Developed from the *Work Experience Guide* of The Ohio State University Nisonger Center (February 2015)

## **Types of Work Experience**

### *Informational Interview*

- A brief experience intended to help job seekers meet different employers in the community and learn about different jobs
- Involves meeting with an employer or other key staff to ask questions about a specific business or industry (see Appendix A for common questions)
- Sometimes involves a tour of the business
- Usually 15-30 minutes at each business
- Allows for the job seeker and business owners in the community to begin to get to know each other
- May provide an opportunity to establish a subsequent work experience such as a job shadow, try out, internship, etc.

### *Job Shadow*

- A brief work-site experience option where a job seeker follows and observes a competent employee in his or her daily activities, but performs no work
- Designed to provide an example of job specific tasks and work behaviors
- Usually 1-2 hours at each business
- Promotes conversation between job seekers and teachers or employment professionals about job skills, training requirements, and job seeker interest
- Limited in that it allows job seekers to observe only.

### *Job Try-Out*

- A brief work site experience where a job seeker has the opportunity to try some job specific tasks.
- Intended to further identify interests and skills, and to gauge working conditions
- Often develops as a discovery activity or after a job shadow.
- Usually 2-4 hours at each job site.
- Typically unpaid experience
- Observations of the job seeker's efforts and level of interest and skill should be documented

### *Internship*

- A more formal program to provide practical, extended experience for beginners in a job that is determined to be a good match with interests, skills, and ideal conditions.
- Tied directly to training and education, specific skill set development
- Essentially on-the-job training in a field that the student or job seeker wants to learn more about

- Longer time frame- typically one month to one year.
- Internships can be paid or unpaid
- If this experience is unpaid, the person cannot replace another employee or fill an open position.
- The experience is under the general supervision of the school/ organization, but personnel are not required to be there at all times (depends upon the funding source and specific goals of the experience)
- Employment professional/ teacher should check in with the job seeker and employer in order to assess progress and plan for next steps
- There is no obligation to work for the company once the internship is over, however, internships may result in a job offer

### *Apprenticeship*

- The job seeker/ apprentice learns the skills needed for the job via working with an experienced craftsman in exchange for doing some work
- An apprenticeship is a paid job
- An apprenticeship is also training, and may include classroom style or other lessons
- Timeframe is determined by trade, often 1-2 years.
- There is often an expectation that the apprentice will continue working for the same employer after training is completed

### *Volunteering / Community Service*

- Formal volunteering is an activity which always takes place in not- for-profit organizations or projects
- Volunteer work experiences should take place where people with and without disabilities are also volunteering
- Not a substitute for paid work but sometimes prepares a person for Community Employment
- Intended to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer
- Must be of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion
- For no financial payment
- In designated volunteer positions only; cannot displace paid staff

### **Setting up Work Experiences: Planning**

Before setting up work experiences, the team should ensure that each job seeker has started a person centered planning process. This process is led by the job seeker and helps to determine their starting place on the Path to Employment. The person centered plan is also focused on helping to develop goals for Community Employment that include consideration of the job seekers interests, preferences, skills, talents, and conditions for success. Additionally, through the process, the job seeker and team will identify the kind of experiences that will be beneficial

as the job seeker moves forward toward their goals. Then, the team can begin to take action and arrange work experience that will best support progress to the employment goal.

### *Decide upon the Purpose*

The ultimate goal of the work experience is to help the job seeker find employment that allows them to contribute their strengths to benefit the business and themselves. The work experience provides an opportunity to explore interests, skills, ideal conditions, and support needs. The team should decide on the types of work experiences that will best accomplish this.

### *Where should the work experience take place?*

Locations for work experiences should be selected that will provide the best experience for the job seeker. Establishing work experiences around the known strengths, interests and learning goals of the job seeker leads to an opportunity for targeted skill development.

It is very helpful to survey your team, the job seeker, and the family for connections to community businesses that are already familiar to them. These established networks in the business community are often more invested in the job seeker and open to hosting a work experience.

The team should decide if the experience takes place with only one business or with a series of businesses. This determination is linked to the goals for the job seeker. For example, a job seeker who is just beginning to explore work and may be unsure of what they like to do will benefit from having a variety of businesses to explore. This allows the job seeker to gain an understanding of what different jobs entail. A job seeker who is already aware of their own interests and talents may benefit from a more intensive experience with one business that allows them to learn job- or industry- specific details.

### *Who is involved in decision making?*

The job seeker is generally the primary decision maker throughout the process. The employment team should consist of people the job seeker invites. The team may include family members, friends, favorite community members, teachers, program staff, and specialized employment personnel.

### *How long should the work experience last?*

The length of the work experience should be linked to the goals for the job seeker. On the Path to Community Employment, job seekers may engage in several different types of work experiences of varying lengths. For example, job seekers with little experience, who have had limited opportunity to gain work skills or to realize a variety of interests may benefit from a series of informational interviews or several short term, 1-2 hour job shadows or job try outs.

Once the job seeker begins to find preferences and emerging skill sets, a more in-depth experience to try out and learn job specific skills may be appropriate.

*Is Parent/ guardian permission needed?*

If the job seeker has a parent or guardian, it is important to ensure that they are involved in the team decision making and that they give permission for the job seeker to participate. Your school or program may want a signed release or permission slip detailing the activities in which the job seeker will engage.

*When should the experience take place?*

The timing of work experiences relies on many factors; the availability of the business, the availability of the job seeker, and school or program staff availability.

For youth, work experiences can often be arranged to take place during school hours which usually align with community business hours. The same is true for adults who are involved in day programming or who are otherwise available during the day. For some job seekers, there may be an interest in exploring work that is not done during standard business hours. The team will need to evaluate their capacity to provide support for such experiences.

Some work experiences are set up to take place only in the summer, while some are year round. Business takes place 24-7 in most communities, so there should be no shortage of opportunities regardless of when the experience is needed.

*What about transportation?*

A transportation plan for each job seeker should be arranged. If the ultimate goal is Community Employment, the team should try to arrange for transportation that is most supportive of that outcome. Work experience provides the added opportunity to help the job seeker access and utilize transportation options that will be available to them as adults once school has ended, or if program transportation is not available. This may mean incorporating travel training to use the local public transportation system, learning to schedule supported transportation, or learning to request and use transportation from friends or family in the community. If the school or program has transportation available for the work experience, it can be used, but helping the jobseeker begin to consider transportation options that will be sustainable and accessible after the program ends is an important goal.

*Who will directly support the job seeker during the experience?*

Staffing levels during the experience will be based on the needs of the job seekers, the goals of the experience, and the requirements of the business. As the work experience is an opportunity for learning, many times there will be a teacher or job coach present during the experience. The teacher or coach will be facilitating the experience as well as assessing what the job seeker is

gaining from the experience. For some longer term experiences such as internships and apprenticeships, the job seeker may begin to increase independence without the constant presence of a teacher or coach. In these instances, the teacher or coach will work very closely with the business owner or supervisor to ensure that the job seeker is meeting the goals of the work experience.

*Should the work experience be for an individual or for a group?*

The decision about the type and location of work experiences should begin with information gathered during a person centered planning process for each individual job seeker. Ideally, job seekers will have some one-to-one time in the community to focus on specific jobs and tasks that align with individualized interests. Additionally, job seekers should have time to meet and engage with business owners, managers, and workers in the community, building relationships and work place social skills. An individualized approach also allows the employment professional to focus completely on the job seeker's uniquely tailored experience, assessing skills and interest and targeting specific learning needs.

There may be some work experiences that are conducive to small group involvement. Each small group participant should still be involved in an individualized planning process to identify skills, interests, and ideal conditions. The job seeker should participate in selecting opportunities that align with their individualized goals and allow them to have a personalized experience. If selecting to do some work experience in a small group, the employment support team must ensure that personalized support can be given to each job seeker. Also, the employment professional must be able to observe and interact with each job seeker sufficiently to ensure that the goals for the experience are being met. Job seekers should not be placed in a group to do a work experience that is not interesting to them or does not provide appropriate support.

### **Setting up Work Experiences: Understand the Job**

- Once you have a business that is committed to providing a work experience, there are several considerations before you begin:
- Be respectful of the business; don't interrupt work flow
- To become familiar with the business, engage in informational interviews with key people
- Obtain job descriptions
- Decide on the type of experience that would be best at this business.
- Learn about expectations, tour the business and observe the various tasks being performed
- Gain names and contact information for the onsite supports and "go-to people" to assure that natural supports are provided

- Write up the description of the work experience to ensure that all support staff are aware of what is expected and are consistent with communicating those expectations to the job seekers.
- Establish a schedule with the business
- Create a list of targeted tasks, skills, and work behaviors that you can assess for the job seeker
- Aim for highest level of independence