

Feature Article

Tinker, Tailor, Seller, Sailor: Assisting Youth to Select Preferred Job Placements Using Video and CD ROM

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How did you select your career? By talking to friends? By working with a teacher or vocational counselor? By systematically gathering information on available options? By comparing pros and cons? By trial and error?

How did you end up with your current job? By focusing your energies on what you knew you wanted? By random application? By chance?

How do youth with severe disabilities select careers? How do they get the jobs they want? If the processes that we used to establish our own employment seem inconsistent and confusing, the system must appear overwhelming to youth with disabilities. Some of us can hardly describe our own meandering career paths. In an age when self-determination and self-advocacy are essential, we can say to youth, "you must choose the job that you prefer" but we are hard-pressed to provide them the tools and procedures to make it happen.

Career choice is largely a matter of selecting from available information collected from various sources. The more we know, the more alternatives we have. For many of us, however, we spend our careers gathering the information from which to generate alternatives. Ironically, we have long since made our choice of employment. It can be a classic case of putting the cart before the horse.

Many high school transition programs are well-equipped to assist youth with job choices. They use career education curricula, competency assessment batteries, vocational assessments, questionnaires, job interest inventories, skill profiles matched to job analysis, and other procedures to assist youth with job selections. But what if a program's resources are limited? What if a particular youth prefers none of the placement alternatives? What if the youth cannot read the fourth-grade material required in many of the vocational interest inventories? What if youth or family want to consider other options?

Now in its final year of development, a federally funded project at Utah State University is evaluating a reading-free, motion video job preference program. The program, called Youth Employment Selections (YES), is undergoing national field testing with youth who have mental retardation, autism, and other developmental disabilities. Districts are evaluating the program in Salt Lake City (Granite), Ogden, Anchorage, AL., San Pablo, CA., Lewiston, MT., Denver, CO., Chicago, IL., Houston, TX., Omaha, NE., Pittsburgh, PA., Baltimore, MD., and Trenton, NJ.

Procedures are established to be efficient and user friendly. An individual youth works with a facilitator (e.g., teacher, paraeducator, transition specialist) at a computer terminal using the CD ROM. The user makes selections by

moving a mouse or by pointing to a touch screen. The youth first makes a series of selections about preferred work conditions (inside vs. outside work, heavy vs. light work, public vs. private work environments, etc.). Next, the youth scrutinizes 20 jobs that match preferred working conditions. Each job is presented in a 2-4 minute video.

The youth views 10 pairs of jobs that match the preferred working conditions. The system for pairing jobs is similar to behavior analysis research to identify stimulus preferences and reinforcers. The youth selects one of two jobs from each pairing. After viewing 20 jobs, the youth again views a new set of randomized pairings of the same jobs. The youth can "fast forward" through a job at any time. This selection process yields a "short list" of 5-10 highly preferred jobs and takes about 60-75 minutes in one or more sessions. An appendix in the Facilitator's Manual provides additional information about each job, including typical salary ranges, benefits, education/training requirements, qualifications, liabilities, and pictures of critical job tasks. After identifying preferred jobs, the youth and facilitator can print out the list, go to other lists of jobs to make additional choices, and/or sample jobs identified by common tasks. Based on the consistency of selections and responses to basic questions about employment, the program also provides a "confidence index" which estimates the validity and reliability of the youth's selections.

When fully developed, the YES program will consist of about 120 jobs. Many different jobs will be shown, including child care worker, personal care aide, dental hygienist, receptionist, manicurist, retail sales person, gardener, brick mason, carpenter, hotel housekeeper, welder, auto mechanic, medical records technician, pest control worker, electronics assembler, food preparation worker, machinist, and veterinary assistant, among many others. The job tasks were originally identified through job analyses from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles. Project staff called employees performing these jobs to verify their accuracy. The jobs shown in the YES program were selected based on data from a national survey of job placements and emerging markets for youth with disabilities. Additional jobs were selected based on input from a multi-state task force assembled by the U.S. Department of Labor.

High school programs may use the YES program to guide a youth's job placements and transition planning. The assumption is that preferred job placements make the transition process more efficient than arranging job placements and discovering later that some were nonpreferred ones. Project staff are planning research on the program and factors such as improved job satisfaction, productivity, and longevity.

Available in the Fall of 2000, the YES program will have been used by several hundred youth. The technology will hopefully provide maximum information at youths' fingertips and allow them to make more informed selections to guide their program and chart their careers. References available from the ULRC upon request. ■

