

# The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

## Follow the Passion: Broadening the Possibilities for Work and Meaningful Contributions

By: Donna Lee

As adults, the work we do often becomes an intrinsic part of how we see ourselves – a source of self-esteem and identity. Too often though, people with intellectual disabilities are limited by expectations of what kinds of jobs are possible for them, thus restricting who they can imagine themselves to be. This article explores ways we can support the growth of that imagination, expanding the possibilities for fulfilling careers, opportunities, and contributions.

Think for a moment about all the jobs you have seen or even heard of someone with an intellectual disability doing. Make a mental list of the various types of jobs you came up with – what's on your list? Most likely your list contains a fair number of jobs in categories like cleaning and janitorial work, food services, stocking shelves, bagging groceries, assembly and packaging, and perhaps some yard work and maintenance. I'm sure there are others on your list too, but if your list is anything like my list, it's pretty limited. It's not that these aren't good jobs – many people work in these jobs and are happy, fulfilled and proud to do so. But when exploring career possibilities and supporting people to make choices about the kind of work they want to do, the list of potential opportunities seems pretty small compared to what people without disabilities have to choose from.

Editors: Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed.  
Angie Nethercott, M.A., RP



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Recently though, a few stories have made their way into my social media newsfeeds about people with intellectual disabilities working in careers that are far outside of the types of jobs listed above. Stories of yoga instructors, artists, college faculty members, phlebotomists (look that one up if you don't know what it means - I had to!), fashion models, horticulturalists, entrepreneurs, authors, and more. These stories are exceptional though; they stand out because it is unusual to hear about people with intellectual disabilities developing their passions and interests into interesting and valued work.

How can we start to support people in ways that will change this so that such stories aren't so exceptional, so that people are supported to follow their passions?



## Starting with Skills

First, let's take a step back and look at what approaches have been used to help people with intellectual disabilities find work. If you've been working in this field for any length of time, you are probably familiar with terms like:

Job readiness

Vocational assessment

Skills evaluations

These have been the bones of our approach to helping people get ready for the work world and find a job. We like to look at what skills people need to demonstrate before they are deemed ready to even begin exploring job options. We have a variety of checklists, assessments, and evaluations that are designed to determine which skills a person can perform independently, which ones they still need to improve, and which skills they just don't have yet. These range from things like fine and gross motor skills, to the ability to take direction and stay on task, to the social skills we use to get along with co-workers. Training and practice to master these skills is provided, recognizing that such skills are important, sometimes even making or breaking a person's success in the job. But, and this is a big but, all too often, we get so focused on helping people learn the skills that we miss helping people discover their passion. We can also have a pretty narrow view of the particular skills that are necessary for work and, as a result, a barrier is put up that limits a person from moving forward until they achieve a skillset that may not actually be necessary for them at all.

I recently heard a story that demonstrates this perfectly – a woman was participating in an employment training program, and several goals had been set for her to achieve before she could move forward in her job search. The folks supporting her knew that social skills can be more important to job success than any other skill, and so were working with her to refine the social skills she would need. This woman was a hard worker, she was engaging, she was motivated...and she had a great big potty mouth. She loved to swear and would pepper her sentences with various creative and traditional cuss words much to the horror of her job coaches. There were conversations about appropriate workplace language, there were reinforcement programs set up to reward cuss-free days, there were charts to track her progress toward achieving this goal. And yet the swearing continued – she wanted a job, but she also wanted to swear. Her staff had pretty much given up hope of finding her competitive employment – no one was going to be willing to hire her with the colourful (but mostly blue) streak coming out of her mouth. And then she started hanging out at the local truck stop – her language was just like the language of everyone else who worked and did business there. Swearing wasn't a barrier to employment in this environment – it was a necessary social skill, and she had it down pat! Shortly thereafter, she had a job at the truck stop that she loved, with coworkers and customers who valued her for exactly who she was.

Another traditional approach to helping people with disabilities find jobs has been to look at "Labour Market Needs" and train people in the skills required to fit what the labour market demands. This approach has resulted in people being employed but tends to maintain the status quo of people with intellectual disabilities being funneled into jobs that are largely concentrated in janitorial work, food services and retail positions – often entry-level, low-wage jobs that are difficult for employers to fill. These aren't bad jobs, but they aren't typically people's dream jobs – at least not people who have had the opportunity to dream big.

Can we do better? Can we support people to dream bigger? Can we imagine more?

## Starting with Passion

Sure, no one loves every job they've ever had; sometimes we take a job just to pay the bills, and we might dread going to work, or just find meaning elsewhere in our lives. But as a DSP, your job isn't to help people live mediocre lives; your job is to provide the very best support you can in order to make it possible for people to live the very best life they can. So, let's reach further, think bigger, imagine more and expand the possibilities available to the people we support when it comes to employment.

Asking someone what they want to do may not be the best place to begin – people may not be able to imagine that yet if they haven't had exposure to many examples of employment outside of those traditional jobs for people with intellectual disabilities. A great place to start is to notice what the person loves to do, what brings them joy. This takes our focus away from skills and onto really getting to know the person. We have to engage with them, pay attention to their interests and responses to the things around them, notice what they are drawn to, and what makes them smile. This process can involve conversations about what the person enjoys most but may also need to involve expanding the experiences the person has, so that they can discover new passions. Then we can think with the person about how those passions and interests might translate into employment of some kind.

This is different than promising the person's 'dream job' – the first idea or discussion about employment may include the person saying, "I want to play for the Maple Leafs." But starting with the person's passion helps to discover their interests, so that we can support them to find a role with which they can engage, express, and explore those interests/passions. Starting with passion can help the person find a career, rather than just a job.

## Entrepreneurship

One route to a fulfilling career can be entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are known for following their passion and finding ways to make money doing it. I once knew a young man named Eric who was passionate about vacuum cleaners; he would spend hours vacuuming, listening to vacuums and, eventually, taking apart vacuums, cleaning them, replacing parts, and putting them back together. Eric's attention span at his vocational training centre was something that his support staff were working on with him; his interest in vacuums was often used to try to motivate him to attend to various work tasks at his vocational training centre – stuff so many envelopes and get 10 minutes of iPad time to watch vacuum videos. On weekends, his mother would take him to the local resale store to purchase old vacuum cleaners with which he would then tinker for hours in the garage – no problem with attention span there. Eventually, it became clear that Eric could diagnose what was wrong with a vacuum cleaner just by listening to it, and knew what to do to fix it. Eric wouldn't have passed a job readiness assessment, but he was talented, and he had a passion. Supported by his family and a job coach, he started a business refurbishing and repairing vacuum cleaners out of his garage. He owned the business, his passion directed the business, and he received support for those aspects of the business that were not part of his skill set, such as marketing and accounting, from a combination of family and professional services.

There are other examples of entrepreneurship – 'Made by Brad' is a business that states on its website's homepage: "Brad has autism, a knack for putting together furniture, and his own business... He can't speak or read, but he has a knack for building things. He can understand any diagram or blueprint, no matter how complicated. For Brad, putting together Ikea furniture is as easy as putting together a Lego set." Hannah Hicks took her passion for art and started, 'Hannah Hicks Art,' a business through which she sells her art on prints, cards, coasters, and

mugs. Other entrepreneurs include chocolatiers, pet sitters, beekeepers, computer repairmen, shop owners, and clothing designers.

### **Paid Employment and Meaningful Contribution**

While there is a shift in focus in recent years to employment for all, and on the right to work for people with disabilities, it is important to be mindful of some of the attitudes toward people with disabilities that have led to this emphasis on waged-employment. Sunny Taylor explains that people with disabilities are often viewed as unproductive citizens, leading to the dangerous idea that they are a burden to society (to understand just how dangerous this idea is, look up what Hitler said about “useless eaters”). Taylor says,

*I have very little work value (if any), and I am a drain on our country's welfare system. I have another confession to make: I do not think this is wrong, and to be honest, I am very happy not working. Instead I spend the majority of my time doing the activity I find the most rewarding and valuable, painting.*

*The very first thing that people ask me when I say I am a painter is “Do you sell your work? Are you supporting yourself?” ... I always feel like this question is a test; a test to see whether my lifestyle and hobby are legitimate; and money is the gauge of this legitimacy. Is money really where all value lies? Are my art and my lifestyle really less meaningful because I do not support myself financially?*

While passion can often lead to employment, following a person's passion is a valuable path in and of itself. There are a great many ways that people make meaningful contributions and fulfill valued roles through the expression of their passions that do not involve an exchange of money. These roles are key to the good functioning of our communities and contribute to our culture, communities, well-being, families, etc. Here are just a handful of examples:

**Activist** – in the disability arena or in any other arena they are passionate about, in person or online

**Artist** – in all forms

**Student/Learner** - through ongoing formal in post-secondary education or in other informal ways

**Mentor/Advisor** - providing support to others in areas in which the person has valuable skill, insight and experience to share

**Committee or Board Member** - there are many opportunities to participate on local committees and boards, contributing to all kinds of organizations, projects and groups

**Vlogger/YouTuber** – check out Frankie MacDonald on YouTube; he has a passion for weather and has a following of over 178,000 people!

**Athlete** - runner, weight lifter, bowler, swimmer, golfer, soccer player, whatever sport brings a person joy. These don't have to be just a weekend hobby, or a once-weekly social outing - when people are passionate about a sport, they often devote hours a day to it.

**Volunteer** – in an area that feeds the person's passion and brings joy that doesn't exploit work that should be paid

**Caregiver** – many people with disabilities have a very important role as caregiver to other people in their family or community

### Seeing the Possibilities

Activist Marian Wright Edelman said, “**You cannot be what you cannot see.**” It’s very hard to imagine yourself in a role when you don’t see others like you in that role. Think about how important it is for girls to see women in a wide range of vocations and roles, and how important it is for black youth to see black adults in careers that may not have been considered accessible to people of colour in the past. The same applies to people with disabilities – we need to search out and share the ever-expanding range of work and contributions that people with disabilities are making in the world. Next time you see a story in your social media newsfeed about someone with an intellectual disability in a really cool job or doing something that feeds their passion – show it to the people with intellectual disabilities that you know! In fact, start searching out these stories and set up a forum for sharing them – perhaps a bulletin board, a weekly conversation, a video presentation. Invite entrepreneurs with intellectual disabilities to come and speak to the folks with whom you work, and support the people you work with to go visit businesses owned and run by people with intellectual disabilities. Bring people with intellectual disabilities together to share their ideas and experiences, to explore possibilities, and to brainstorm new business options. Facilitate peer mentorships – people with intellectual disabilities who have experience in developing a career or passion mentoring others with intellectual disabilities to do the same.

Support people to see what they can be, to imagine their possibilities, and to follow their passions.

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### About the Author:

Donna Lee is an educator and consultant who has worked with people with Intellectual Disabilities and the staff that support them for over 25 years. She currently teaches *Disability Issues* at Ryerson University and is faculty within Nova Scotia Community College’s *Foundations in Educational Supports* and *Disability Supports and Services* programs.

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