



London Job Search Strategies Forum

*London, ON
November 2, 2007*



Introduction

The forum in London, held on November 2nd at the Delta London Armouries Hotel, was the tenth event in a four-year NEADS' Job Search Strategies Forums Project, addressing practical aspects of successful transition from school to the job market. Delegates represented a number of colleges and universities in the London area. Student participants were attending the following post-secondary institutions: University of Western Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University, Mohawk College, Algoma University College, McMaster University, Fanshawe College, Seneca College, Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Waterloo, Ryerson University, Queen's University and Canadore College.

Altogether about 60 people took part in the day-long employment session: students, graduates, employers, career counsellors/professionals and representatives from non-governmental organizations. Approximately 10 audience members participated in the workshop through a webcast that was piloted by NEADS.

The NEADS London Job Search Strategies Forum included two workshop panels, an exhibit area, and one-on-one resume consultations with career counsellors over the lunch period. The exhibit area included displays and representatives from: BMO Financial Group, IBM Canada, Ontario March of Dimes, ATN Access Inc, Leads Employment Services Inc., Ontario Public Service, Youth Opportunities Unlimited and Business Takes Action: Employment of Persons with Disabilities: 10/20 Challenge, Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters.

Welcome and Overview

Jennifer Dillon - Job Search Strategies Consultant, NEADS
Margaret Shalma - Vice President, External; Ontario Representative, NEADS

Jennifer Dillon welcomed the participants to the tenth forum in the series, the second to include participants attending online. The purpose of these forums is to offer practical techniques and job search strategies to help recently graduated and current university students move on from academic success to challenging careers.

Dillon explained that the forums, which are sponsored by BMO Financial Group, began in August 2005. NEADS originally intended to support eight forums, in different locations across Canada, for a period of two years. However, BMO recently announced it would extend its support for another two years, into 2009.

Dillon introduced Margaret Shalma, Ontario Representative, who said this was the first such event in London. She had attended two other events, in Sudbury in October 2007 and in Winnipeg in February 2007, and that she had come away with very useful ideas from both forums. She explained that NEADS is a student-run organization, with non-profit, charitable status, and has been operating for 21 years. She urged participants to learn job search strategies and take advantage of the opportunities offered at the forum.

Dillon introduced a short video that described the mandate of the BMO Equity Through Education Program, profiling several young university students and recent graduates who have benefited from a variety of programs that assist people with disabilities. The video explained that BMO Financial Group's Equity Through Education Program is designed to give bright, deserving people an opportunity they might not otherwise have had. The video profiled federal prosecutor Jason

Mitschele, who is blind and is a past executive member of NEADS; a young woman attending Rutgers University on a scholarship from the Jackie Robinson Foundation (Robinson was the first African-American man to play professional baseball); a First Nation student whose university tuition is supported by the Foundation for the Advancement of Aboriginal Youth (FAAY); and a young woman assisted by the Canadian Merit Scholarship Foundation, which focuses on students who combine academic excellence with a commitment to community service.

Following the video, Dillon returned to the podium to offer a few tips on how to get the most from the day's presentations. She explained that the forum brings together students, service providers, and employers, because networking is so important to the job search process. She encouraged participants to get involved and ask questions. For people who were not comfortable in large group settings, there would be plenty of opportunities to meet one on one, at which time career professionals would be available to go over participants' resumés. Dillon asked that participants be open to receiving feedback, and to getting a number of different perspectives.

Transitioning from School to Work

Stephen McDonnell - Senior Advisor, External Communications, Talent Management and Diversity, BMO Financial Group

Stephen McDonnell said, "There are things you will hear over and over again today. But if many people say the same thing, you have to consider that there may be something in that for you. That's how wisdom is gathered." He showed a PowerPoint presentation on BMO Financial Group's corporate values; diversity and respect were listed second and third. He advised graduates to use the Internet to learn about the values of companies they are interested in working for.

McDonnell refuted a number of misconceptions about workers with disabilities. Statistics show that they do not take more sick leave; they can do the jobs available because new technologies have opened many doors; and the cost of making accommodations in the workplace is reasonable.

He recommended that job seekers with disabilities assemble a team of four or five people. This success team can deliver honest advice on the job seeker's public presentation and style of dress, can role-play job interview situations, and can critique his or her resumé—for spelling mistakes, for example.

When researching companies, applicants should seek out details on the volunteer activities of the company's managers and executives—whether any of them volunteer in the disability community, for example. Applicants should scout out the company offices to ascertain how accessible they are. Some employers who need to meet employment equity requirements are very open to hiring people with disabilities.

McDonnell reminded participants to include as much information as possible about their volunteer experience on their resumés, quantifying how many hours they volunteer. Applicants should also sprinkle their resumés with jargon from the website of the company to which they are applying.

Applicants should specify any accommodations they will need, and clarify their proficiency with special accommodation software such as JAWS (for vision impairments) or Kurzweil (which supports better writing for people with a variety of learning disabilities). McDonnell reassured participants that most companies are familiar with a range of special needs. Most importantly, applicants should avoid making their resumés a story about their disability, but rather should ensure that the resumé reflects their desire to work. It is important for applicants to understand their own boundaries regarding accommodation, and the prospective employer has a right to ask about that. However, applicants should avoid using the resumé or job interview as an opportunity to advocate for their disability.

Applicants must ensure that the references listed on the resumé are relatively current and can still be contacted. McDonnell said, "You don't want [the reference] saying 'who?' when the employer calls to ask about you."

McDonnell said that applicants might go through as many as five interviews in the application for one job. If the applicant needs accommodation to handle a telephone interview—which is usually the first one—he or she should be clear about that, and make any other applicable arrangements for accommodations before the in-person interview. If an applicant will be bringing a service dog, it should be borne in mind that the interviewer might be allergic, and in that case, the dog will have to stay outside the interview room.

Job seekers must remember that first impressions are lasting, and this includes appearance.

During the interview, applicants should ask questions to determine whether the company is a good fit for them. "If the interviewer treats you like the first Martian he's ever met," McDonnell said, "then you probably don't want to work there."

McDonnell said that after hiring, another long process would begin, which would include more disclosure about necessary accommodations. This is the time to determine any equipment needed or, if the disability is a mental health one, what might happen if medications need to be adjusted. "Be proactive," McDonnell advised participants. "Have that conversation with your new boss about what you need to preserve your dignity. And get out there and participate in the company's social events."

Preparing for Interviews

Terry Peach - Manager of Organization and Staffing, GE Canada

The second panelist, Terry Peach, focused on interview skills. But at first he discussed opportunities available at GE Canada and the diversity of the company. He agreed with McDonnell that the first interview is usually by phone, and said applicants should ask for any accommodation they may need for a phone interview. He recommended preparing an appropriate audio background: applicants should let roommates know when the phone interview will take place and ask them to be quiet. Peach added, "Don't do it from a bar on your cell phone."

As soon as an applicant enters the room, employers start making assessments regarding handshake, body language, and dress—even statements that might have been made earlier, in the elevator.

Prior to the interview, applicants should have researched the company online and made sure they know what the company does and what it produces. Once the main interview starts, applicants must be clear about their skills and goals and be ready for some tough questions—for example, regarding their reaction after making a specific mistake, or a situation in which they had to handle a difficult customer. On the topic of replying to questions, Peach advised applicants to frame stories about their experience using "CAR": Context, Action and Results. Applicants should explain the background to a specific example or situation (the context); what they did about it (their actions); and what the results were.

Peach described the four most common types of job interview: behavioural, situational, job function and unguided.

- > > In a behavioural interview, which is the most common, applicants will be

asked to tell stories—for example, about how they handled a difficult customer who demanded a complicated service at the end of a long day, or about a significant accomplishment in a work setting.

- > > Situational interviews ask applicants to respond to a specific hypothetical situation. Even in these cases, Peach advised that a behavioural answer is ideal—applicants should tell the interviewer what they did in a real situation that parallels the hypothetical test.
- > > Job function interviews test actual job skills, perhaps on an engineering or accounting problem.
- > > An unguided interview might start with the general question, "Tell me a little about yourself."

Almost all interviewers will ask applicants to make self-assessments, such as "what do you see as your major strengths and weaknesses?"

"Don't ever say something like: 'I work too hard'," Peach said. "The right answer is to offer some suggestions about the kinds of training that you would appreciate."

During the interview, applicants should ask questions to help them decide whether they still want the job, and if this is the case at the end of the interview, applicants should reaffirm their interest in the job and ask when they will hear about next steps. On the way out of the building, it is important that applicants remember they are still "on interview." Peach recommended sending a note of thanks to the interviewer after the interview; e-mail is acceptable, he said, but a hand-written note by regular mail is rare, and more appreciated.

Launching Your Career Through an Internship and Asking About Accommodation

Donna Smith - Vice President, Market Development, Career Edge Organization

The Ability Edge division of Career Edge Organization arranges paid, full-time internships for recent graduates with disabilities. These internships run for six, nine or twelve months and are designed to help break the cycle of “no experience, no job.” Donna Smith explained that graduates register through the Ability Edge website and complete an online skills assessment form, which can be found at www.abilityedge.ca. Ability Edge matches graduates with employers, including many who are required by federal regulation to hire people with disabilities. These employers are well informed about accommodation options, and they need a pool of well-educated people with disabilities.

The internship placements help graduates build their skills in a supportive environment, with employers who are prepared to meet accommodation needs. The interns receive regular performance reviews and develop a professional network led by an assigned mentor. The employer benefits from gaining access to new talent and providing mentoring opportunities for their established employees.

Smith reviewed the key points that make a successful resumé and cover letter. The cover letter should be customized for each job application, according to the job description. Grammar, spelling and punctuation must be correct. The cover letter should also be kept brief and describe certain major accomplishments or experiences that will resonate with the job description. Do not use fancy paper, she added, and don't attach “decorations,” such as ribbons or small toys.

To prepare for an interview, Smith recommended that the applicant carry out a personal skills assessment that addresses the job description as it was advertised.

Applicants should list their abilities, interests, and personal accommodation needs, and decide how much they will disclose about their disability in the interview. It is important for applicants to practice their interview presentation with their own support network, reviewing their posture, their hand movements, eye contact, and whether their clothes have a professional look.

Smith advised graduates to ask many questions at the interview, to learn more about the company culture and a typical day in the workplace. “What happens during the orientation period? What ongoing support will be available? What will happen at various points along the six- or nine- or twelve-month internship period? What will the performance reviews look like? What major accomplishment opportunity might be available? What will I learn from the co-workers and mentors assigned to me? What will the regular dialogue about my reasonable accommodation needs look like?”

She told applicants to be proactive about their accommodation needs; however, they should not simply identify the barriers, but also offer a solution statement. “If you can't stand for extended periods of time, suggest that it would be very helpful if you could use a high stool during your shift—that would help you to concentrate more on the customers.”

At the completion of the internship, graduates should revise their resúmes to reflect new learning and any major accomplishments in the workplace. At the end of the pre-agreed internship period, the employer will have the option to decide whether to offer a full-time job.

Questions and discussion

A participant asked whether it was acceptable to use humour in an interview. “As long as it’s not about me,” replied McDonnell. He added that humour could be a good icebreaker, provided it is light and not caustic or disrespectful. Deeper humour risks being misinterpreted. Smith added that applicants should take their cues from the interviewer regarding the mood and tone of the interview.

Another participant asked about her concerns over a reference letter from a former employer. Although the letter is positive, it mentions that she had to take extensive sick leave, involving several surgeries. She asked how she could get a potential new employer to see the positive aspects of that experience.

McDonnell replied that gaps in an applicant’s work history are not a matter of concern to him. Time away from work can be developmental; ability to do the job is the most important aspect. He added that he does not pay much attention to reference letters, as they are always positive. He prefers to call the applicant’s previous manager and have a personal conversation about the applicant’s strengths and weaknesses. He advised against submitting a reference letter, unless specifically asked to do so.

Dillon interjected that this question brings up the larger issue of the best time for an applicant to disclose a disability and accommodation needs. “Everyone needs to put some thought into that. I recommend not putting it [specific disability details] on your resumé.” If the employer mentions in the job ad that they are committed to employment equity, then applicants might want to mention in their cover letter that they fit into one of the groups covered by employment equity. Accommodation information can be discussed in the interview, Dillon said.

In reply to another question about the gaps that exist between “equitable” employers and “regular” employers, Peach said that on reviewing a resumé, his company is very interested in extracurricular activities and summer jobs. “We’re looking for a person who will take initiative and make things happen.” He said it could be beneficial to disclose a disability early. He described a candidate who was hired because the company was impressed with his phenomenal efforts to complete an MBA after incurring brain damage in an accident.

Smith added that job seekers should not underestimate the power of researching a company before they apply to it. Certain values may be identified on the company’s website and reveal a great deal about that employer’s receptiveness to applicants with a disability.

A participant asked what universities could do to better prepare students with a disability for the transition to employment. Dillon replied that it would be helpful if students were given more mentoring relationships with graduates who are already working, to get a sense of the skills they will have to develop to work better in an office environment.

McDonnell mentioned some of his disappointing experiences with disability coordinators at universities, as well as professors who are involved in job recruitment, as they often do not advise students with a disability about the equitable employers attending college job fairs.

Smith said too many resúmes describe the courses a student took, but not the transferable skills those courses teach. “If you took English Lit or Political Science, you’ve got research skills, you’ve worked on teams, and you can do presentations.” She added that universities should prep graduates more effectively for behavioural interviews.

Peach said it is important for students to pursue activities beyond the academic during the time they are completing a degree; students should take advantage of volunteer opportunities, for example. Dillon agreed, adding that finding time for volunteer experiences can be a real challenge for students with a disability, who are already concerned about meeting the demands of school assignments and taking longer to complete a degree. She expressed her disappointment that when NEADS contacts disability services at various universities to promote the job search forums, university officials often seem more worried about students missing class to attend.

A participant viewing the session online asked about the best media vehicles for a company to promote its opportunities for graduates with a disability.

McDonnell replied that people with a disability do not read only specialty magazines for the disabled community; they read and watch mainstream media, like other members of the public, so his company advertises in these areas. He recommended developing relationships with external associations—such as CNIB, March of Dimes, the Canadian Paraplegic Association, and the Canadian Hearing Society—that advocate for specific disabilities, and being aware of which employers hire people with disabilities.

Peach added that his company does not often see students with more obvious disabilities at college job fairs. He said he was uncertain why these students do not attend such events, but he asked the questioner to forward any suggestions regarding how to correct that.

A participant asked what could be done to lobby employers who have still not made their workplaces physically accessible.

Dillon replied that she had been thrilled to learn about Ability First, a group of employers in London that has taken the initiative to educate other companies about employment equity. The target of Business Takes Action, another program by the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters Association, is to achieve a 10% target of new hires being people with disabilities by 2020.

Smith added, “It’s easy to think about what we can’t do.” She advised graduates to make a personal decision about what they can do to fix an unfair situation. If an applicant believes he or she was denied a job because of a disability, despite good qualifications, Smith advised that the applicant call the employer back and ask—in a professional manner—why he or she did not get the job. “Not all employers will respond, but one or two will,” Smith said.

When asked about the possibility of part-time internships, Smith explained that all their internships are full time, because the company is looking for graduates who are ready to launch their careers and move into full-time employment.

A participant who obtained his degree from an American university asked how he could find out whether it meets standards required for specific Canadian jobs. Smith advised him to contact any of several professional organizations that evaluate foreign degrees, such as World Educational Services or the University of Toronto, and to Google “educational credentialing.”

NEADS Student Award Programs and Mentorship Program

Julia Munk - Project Consultant, Equity through Education Mentorship and Scholarship Program, NEADS

Julia Munk described the two types of student awards available from NEADS. Up to four awards of \$3,000 are given out annually to individuals in the following categories: university undergraduate, graduate/professional, and college student and/or a student from CÉGEP (College of General and Vocational Education) in Quebec.

The second type of award is given to a student group or campus committee, up to a maximum value of \$5,000. The amount awarded depends on the project's merit. The annual award is given to a group or committee whose programs or innovation has improved campus life for students with disabilities. The award criteria can include conferences and symposia or education/awareness workshops or training. "This program is excellent, and it's the first of its kind in Canada," said Munk. To be eligible, the student must be a person with a disability, a Canadian citizen and a full-time university student, defined as a student with a 40% course load.

Munk explained that last year, NEADS did not give out a student group award, but instead awarded additional individual gifts: three scholarships to undergraduates, two to graduate students and one to a student in a college program.

Both group and individual award applications are available on the NEADS website at www.neads.ca. Applicants should click on the Equity through Education Awards link for applications. Because the December 1, 2007 deadline for the individual awards was approaching, Munk recommended applying online, as it is often

faster and easier. However, NEADS accepts both mail and online applications.

NEADS is also developing a mentorship program, Munk said. Mentors aid students with their employment prospects and help them develop networking skills. NEADS is currently looking for mentors, and Munk invited interested individuals to contact her by phone or to e-mail her directly. There is a short form as well as a longer application to fill out.

Inroads and Impasses: Disability, Education and Employment

Jeff Preston - Master's Student, Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

Jeff Preston thanked NEADS for inviting him to speak. As a student with a disability, he is studying perceptions and constructions of disability and identity with regard to adaptive technology. He said he is interested in issues facing individuals with disabilities and, in particular, those students making the transition from secondary to post-secondary and on to full-time employment. He would like to go further in his own studies and obtain a doctorate to continue his research in disability and media studies.

Preston said students with disabilities face several barriers to obtaining full-time employment. The main barrier is lack of education. "Very few students with disabilities go past high school, let alone go to university or further." Financial concerns and societal attitudes are two major reasons for this gap: "Kids are often told in elementary school and high school that you can't go to university because you're in a wheelchair. It's a reality that these attitudes exist in our society."

In elementary school, students with a disability are often streamed into developmental learning programs and therefore do not qualify to go on to post-secondary education, Preston said. Further to this, the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) does not offer encouragement and medical coverage; thus, individuals have no incentive to earn their own living, and instead may choose to live off support payments, as it is easier.

Lack of accessible transportation is another barrier to employment. The transit system in London and Ontario as a whole is broken, Preston said. "It's not reliable, and we're tired of being held hostage. The real-

ity is that if you don't get to work on time, you lose your job."

The third major barrier to finding employment is lack of work experience. Aside from jobs that are not accessible due to physical limitations, people with disabilities need to use skills, and to practice them, to find employment. However, it is a vicious cycle, said Preston: without experience, they cannot find employment. This reality prevents them from transitioning to higher education.

Preston related his own experience at university, where he was able to gain expertise and confidence through a co-op program. In the program, he worked with a community partner to gain experience. At the Easter Seals of London, Preston developed advocacy training and spoke about students' transition from high school to higher education. He ran the program for over a year, during which time he gained valuable experience in several areas, including budgeting and networking. He obtained further experience by teaming up with a journalist, the field in which he wanted to work. He discovered barriers in media itself, but he said people with disabilities could get past these obstacles by knowing their limitations and their abilities and communicating their needs to the employer.

Preston summed up his presentation, mentioning the large financial barrier to post-secondary education. Ontario offers bursaries, such as the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), available to graduate students at the Master's and doctoral levels. Many other bursaries are listed on the NEADS website.

Five Things I Wish I Had Known: First-hand Employment Experience

Avril Rinn - Life Skills Coach, Instructor, Computer Support Person, ATN Access for Persons with Disabilities, Inc.

Avril Rinn said she had taken up her employer's offer to speak at the forum because she is interested in seeing people with disabilities get employment opportunities. A way of getting those opportunities, she said, is through the right support. However, she said one overriding aspect shocks her: young people coming out of high school without a plan for their future.

Describing herself as a positive-minded person, Rinn said she believes that as support for those with disabilities increases, opportunities can arise and things can change. She commented that the ODSP has issues, but no system is perfect. Rinn mentioned that much of her advice is not new, but said that nothing can replace a strong, good resumé and good job search skills. She said she is mystified by the fact that some job seekers still do not spell check their resúmes. "I've seen those resúmes where they write 'Dear Sir' for a female."

Legally blind all her life, Rinn said she had found her current employment "by accident," 17 years ago. After graduating from high school, she was not emotionally prepared for university and did not do well. When she returned to higher education later, however, spending her own money on tuition gave her a sense of ownership and she did better.

Rinn is currently employed as a life skills coach and said she is continually surprised to find both middle-aged and younger people with disabilities with no work experience. Drawing on her own experiences, good and bad, she offered advice to the participants. People with a disability should:

- > > Get life experience. "Even if you're walking to the grocery store, meet people and interact in a meaningful way." In 2003, Rinn trained with a guide dog, something she had talked about doing for many years. She said she is still building on that life experience. Another significant event was becoming a trustee for the Leader Dogs for the Blind in Rochester, Michigan. Rinn has since written magazine articles about these experiences. "Say yes to what people offer," she said. She also referred to discrimination against people with disabilities, but said those with disabilities must tell others what they need. She agreed that life with a disability is harder, but said that life is hard in general, so everyone does what he or she can.
- > > Find out what a degree is worth in monetary value. Rinn told participants to find out the status of a degree to ensure it will lead to a job. A degree in history is great, she said, but she questioned whether it has a practical application.
- > > Avoid using disability as a crutch. Some individuals blame their inability to get a job on their disability, said Rinn, but she questioned whether this was just masking the real issues. "Or [did you not get the job] because you don't have the skills?" Rinn said. She recommended seeking an honest opinion about one's abilities.
- > > Know about assisted technology to help job prospects. Rinn said that if employees require a piece of assisted technology to help with a job, they should do some homework first to tell prospective employers about equipment needs. Find out "how much it costs, and where you can buy it," she said. "This is your responsibility, not your employer's. Be proactive."

- > > Know abilities and limitations. Rinn also suggested listening to constructive criticism and feedback and learning from it. "If everyone in your life is telling you the same thing—give it credence." In a job setting, the interviewer will not be as honest, Rinn said.
- > > Have realistic goals in life. "I wish people with disabilities weren't always falling into disability-oriented careers," said Rinn, adding, "I'm a hypocrite because I am in that field." She said she would like to see people with disabilities shoot higher and use innovative thinking.
- > > Take care of mental and physical health. Individuals with disabilities would benefit from a healthy lifestyle.
- > > Maintain a sense of humour and a positive attitude.

Rinn concluded that everyone with a disability should have a degree, and thanked the audience for attending.

Opportunities in the Public Sector

Stephan Borau - Outreach Coordinator, Youth and New Professionals Secretariat, Ontario Public Service

Attracting talent to an organization is becoming more and more difficult, Stephan Borau said, and the Ontario Public Service (OPS) is focusing on retaining and recruiting a diverse work force "to be a more attractive employer and also to better reflect the communities that we serve."

Borau said there are many reasons to consider the OPS as an employer: the work is meaningful, the salaries are competitive, the benefits are good, and the career options are diverse. The OPS has a variety of employment opportunities in many sectors: "Any sector that the Ontario government is involved in—health care immigration, justice, tourism; we have a tremendous variety of opportunities."

Borau mentioned the variety of internships for students who have graduated from university or college in the past few years, including 10-month and two- to three-year options. The OPS website lists all these opportunities, he said.

First-, second- or third-year students can also find summer employment, said Borau. In 2007, the OPS hired 4,000 students for a variety of positions. Postings are placed on the website from March on, and students must apply for each job individually. In addition, bilingual students may apply for the Ontario/Quebec exchange program. Participants will work in the Quebec government for 13 weeks, organizing cultural events. The Aboriginal Youth Work Exchange program is available for First Nation youth; students will work in the Natural Resources sector in northern Ontario. In addition to these opportunities, the OPS posts new job listings on its website every Friday. Generally, there are

between 20 and 30 new positions a week, Borau said.

Recruitment applications can be made online, via fax, paper, and regular mail. There is no central recruitment area, and the OPS does not keep resumés on file. Depending on the position, there may be a technical test, and then a panel interview with two or three people. Borau said, "It will feel very structured, because in the interests of fairness and transparency, every applicant will be asked the same questions and scored against the same criteria."

Borau said prospective employees of the OPS should be aware that there is an Employee Accommodation Fund (EAF). OPS has a centralized fund that managers can access to provide accommodations for applicants during the interview process and after they are hired. "This is something you can request from the hiring manager or after you've started," said Borau. Not all managers are aware of this fund.

Regarding the matter of disclosure of a disability, the choice is up to the individual. However, applicants should only disclose when they need to, he said. "If you need an accommodation during the interview process, then ask for one." This principle also applies after an employee has been hired. If an accommodation is needed, employees should disclose this to their manager, said Borau.

Borau said new positions are added every Friday to the career portal at www.ontario.ca/careers. These jobs, including internships, are available to the public. The website includes resumé tips and information on the 18 different job categories. If a job description is not online, applicants can request this from human resources; every applicant is entitled to know the job description.

Borau discussed the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) legislation, which passed in 2005 but has a long-term goal of completion in 2025. The new legislation looks at five areas for improvement in work conditions for those with disabilities: transportation, built environment, information and communications, customer service and employment.

Four standing committees are currently creating standards for this legislation. The first set of standards, customer service, is coming out in January 2008, and industry has two years to comply with those standards. Employers will face stiff fines (up to \$50,000) for non-compliance. For more details about the legislation, those interested should visit the Ministry of Community and Social Services website.

Dillon agreed that the website is useful for finding various job options for specific educational backgrounds.

NEADS Web-based Employment Resources

Margaret Shalma - Vice President,
External; Ontario representative, NEADS

Margaret Shalma outlined NEADS' history and goals. NEADS was created in 1986 and is a consumer-based, cross-disability group that focuses on various disabilities, including mental and physical. As a member of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, NEADS' objectives are twofold: inclusion for people with a disability and full access to post-secondary education and employment opportunities.

NEADS is governed by a 12-person board—one representative for each province and territory and one open seat—and its membership includes college and university students, recent graduates, professionals and employers.

The association's work involves research on a variety of topics, such as financial aid and alternative format materials. All this information can be found on the NEADS website; Shalma encouraged the audience to use the resources that the association has online. NEADS also has an active and informative listserve, called NEADS-L. Margaret said participants in this forum are also welcome to attend the biannual national conference coming up in November 2008 in Ottawa.

NEADS' employment initiatives started in 1994 with an advisory council for progressive employers interested in hiring employees with disabilities: the Employer Advisory Council to NEADS (EAC). NEADS developed important projects such as Investing in the Future: A Mentorship Program for Post-Secondary Students with Disabilities, and the Student Leadership and Employment Forums. NEADS is currently running the Job Search Strategies Forums project. The forums began in 2005, and this meeting is the tenth.

NEADS' employment publications include Employment Connections for students and Access to Success: A Guide for Employers, which helps employers understand the needs of employees with a disability. All these publications are available on the website: www.neads.ca.

Launched in 2003, the NEADS Online Work System www.nows.ca is a website for students with disabilities which provides job postings and various features, said Shalma. Students can post resumés and search and apply for a variety of jobs. Currently the site has over 1,600 registered graduates and students with disabilities, 700 of whom are from Ontario. Ninety-six registered employers representing 25 different industries across the country use the job site.

The sectors seeking to hire include government, administration, social services, education/training and financial services, just to name a few.

For more information, students can visit www.nows.ca or call the head office in Ottawa and speak with the national coordinator, Frank Smith, at 613-526-8008, or e-mail him at frank.smith@neads.ca.

Discussion

A participant asked Borau about internships. If the student is not hired as a full-time employee at OPS after the internship terminates, can he or she go back to receiving ODSP? There are various internships, ranging from 10 months and up, Borau said, but he did not know how internships affected ODSP payments. Dillon said applicants have to know the amount they are making during the internship, and then speak directly to ODSP to find out how that meets its criteria. Preston added that ODSP does have a quick reinstatement program. If students lose their jobs, they can ask to be fast-tracked to continue receiving a salary.

Another participant said he was impressed with Rinn's comments, particularly concerning those with disabilities striving to do more, or at least break the trend. He was interested to know how people with a disability can find a balance between their life, their career, and their desire to become an advocate. Rinn said people with disabilities should not restrict their career paths to advocacy, because this is the easier road. If people with a disability have other interests beside their disability, they can be better advocates, and lead fuller lives. People with a disability should branch out into various fields. Rinn added that having guaranteed financial support through ODSP might also make some individuals less driven to go out and find a new career path.

Dillon commented that individuals should have an honest passion for the work they pursue. "There are those who work in the disability field because they want to and those who don't feel they have any other choice," she said, adding that there is a distinct difference.

Preston said people with disabilities have an innate desire to help others: "We have been helped all our lives and we feel the need to reciprocate." The easiest way to

break barriers and dispel the myths about disabilities, he said, is to put less emphasis on the disability itself.

An online participant asked how individuals with a disability could debunk myths and misconceptions about their disability to employers. Rinn explained that this is tiring but unavoidable; she said that adding a little humour to the explanation could lessen some of the seriousness of the issue. "People will take you as seriously as you take yourself, and people will follow your lead," she said. She said it is also important for people with a disability to tell employers what they need to make their job easier and better.

Another participant wanted to know why applicants should not mention their disability on their resumé to OPS, and if they do, whether it is viewed as a negative. Dillon commented that people with a disability want to be considered for their abilities and not their disability. "You should only mention your disability when you need an accommodation, otherwise why bring it up?" Borau said that while federal charter mandates equity targets for groups such as First Nation individuals, this is not the case for people with a disability. As an organization, the OPS does not have employment equity targets regarding people with a disability. "People wouldn't put their hair colour on their resumé, and that's all a disability is: a little bit of a difference," said Preston.

A participant asked about bilingualism when applying for a job with the OPS. The participant explained that she is learning American Sign Language in English but has not had an opportunity to learn French, and asked whether this would affect her chances of finding work. Borau said the federal government focuses on French and English because they are the national languages, but in Ontario, about 95% of the workforce operates in English.

Closing Remarks

Jennifer Dillon thanked the participants and panellists for attending. She said participants are welcome to add feedback about the forum as we have developed an online survey for this purpose. She reiterated some of the day's main points and added some new ones. Those seeking employment should keep in mind the following, she said:

- > > Success teams are useful for their suggestions, feedback, and support in finding employment.
- > > Experience is important for furthering job prospects.
- > > Accommodation needs should be researched before taking on a job.
- > > Disclosure of a disability is an important subject with many implications.
- > > Learning to network is key, as it generates great opportunities.
- > > It is vital to be honest about goals and abilities.
- > > Many areas of interest should be developed; those seeking employment should also create a career plan and set goals.
- > > Taking advantage of opportunities and risk-taking is important.
- > > Job seekers should use internships and online resources to enhance job searching.
- > > Accessing the hidden job market is recommended. The following site, developed by the University of Western Ontario Career Services, offers excellent job search strategies: www.career.uwo.ca/students/services/workshops/html.

Dillon said she hoped the forum had been useful, but added it is ultimately up to the participants to take advantage of the resources available to them. "Have an

open mind and don't be afraid to try something new," she said. Participants should keep a positive outlook and know that each small accomplishment leads to greater and better things.