

Job Search Strategies Forum

*National Educational Association
of Disabled Students (NEADS)*

**Regina, Saskatchewan
November 7, 2009**

Table of Contents

Welcome and Overview	1
 Workin' Your Job Search	2
 Disability in the Workplace: Effective Accommodation Planning	6
 Transitioning from School to Work.....	8
Discussion.....	9
 Tips on Preparing for Interviews: What Recruiters Look For	11
 My Gift: The Challenges and Joys of a Mature Student and Social Worker with a Disability.....	13
 NEADS Web-Based Employment Resources.....	14
Discussion.....	14
 Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP).....	15
 Networking	16
 Final Tips for Your Job Search.....	16

Introduction

The forum in Regina was the eighteenth event in a six-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 throughout Saskatchewan. Student participants were attending the following post-secondary institutions: Campbell Collegiate, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan.

Forty-Five people took part in the day-long employment session: students, graduates, employers, career counsellors/professionals and representatives from non-governmental organizations.

The NEADS Regina Job Search Strategies Forum included two workshop panels, an exhibit area, and one-on-one resume consultations with career counsellors / HR professionals over the lunch period. The exhibit area included displays and representatives from: BMO Financial Group, Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW), Neil Squire Society, Saskatchewan Gaming Corporation, Saskatchewan Government Insurance, SaskPower, and South Saskatchewan Independent Living Centre.

Welcome and Overview

SPEAKERS

Jennifer Dillon
National Educational Association of Disabled Students

Jesse LeClaire
Saskatchewan Director
National Educational Association of Disabled Students

Jennifer Dillon welcomed participants to the 18th Job Search Strategies Forum, a project that began in August 2005 in order to offer strategies and practical techniques to help disabled students find success in the job market. The original plan was to host eight events over two years, but the program continued, and has now been extended to March 2011. The next forum will be held in Quebec City in early April, 2010.

Jesse LeClaire said it had been some time since the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) had hosted an event in Regina.

“We are, in fact, an organization for students, run by students, and with a mission of advocacy for equal access to education and employment,” said LeClaire. “NEADS does research, manages projects such as this forum, and offers a student scholarship program, as well as providing a comprehensive website full of resources—which I must add has been recently re-done and is truly fantastic.”

He invited participants to visit www.neads.ca, which offers financial aid resources, and a job site where students can post their resumés and search job postings.

LeClaire said next year's national conference in Winnipeg would be an excellent networking opportunity for participants. He urged everyone to attend and take advantage of the opportunities and information that would be available.

Dillon explained that NEADS began its work in 1986 and over time has been responding to an increasing demand for employment initiatives for post-secondary students and graduates with disabilities. In order to help students make the transition from school to work, the Job Search Strategies project was created with the support of BMO Capital Markets. BMO Capital Markets' Equity Through Education program assists people living with disabilities in finding work placements.

Workin' Your Job Search

SPEAKER

Shari Thompson

Career Services Officer

Student Employment and Career Centre

University of Saskatchewan

Shari Thompson's work focuses on helping students move from education to employment, and on helping employers coordinate on-campus recruitment efforts. Thompson told participants that although they might have a disability, their job search does not.

When the job search becomes frustrating, the job seeker should refocus and perform a "job search intervention." A focused employment search includes assessing the seeker's interests, values, skills, and personality; researching and understanding possibilities; evaluating options and deciding on best-fit directions; clarifying goals and developing an action plan; transitioning to the world of work; and managing change and growth.

The job search process is a cycle, but a job seeker can enter the cycle at any point, depending on their circumstances. Thompson uses a 10-step model for the search process.

Self-awareness is the first step in an effective job search. Job seekers should know their objectives, and the kind of career path they want to follow. They should know what they have to offer an employer, including their educational background, technical skills, transferable skills, and self-management skills. Relevant hands-on experience like group projects, internships, presentations and essays, and research theses should also be noted.

The next step in the process is learning about the potential employer. Review the company's website, speak to someone who works for the company, or look for books, reviews, and company literature in the local library, said Thompson.

As a further step, an "occupational interview" involves calling someone who works for the company and asking to sit down and talk to them about their job. The job seeker will often come away from such a meeting with a business card, and possibly an interview.

Maintaining a professional image—especially online—is important. Social networking websites such as Facebook can be easily accessed by employers, allowing them information about an applicant’s lifestyle and personal habits. Be polite and professional when answering the phone. Thompson said job seekers who are living with other people should ensure that all members of the household answer the phone in a professional manner.

A good cover letter and resumé are essential, said Thompson. The University of Saskatchewan offers students an hour-long session to review and advise them on their cover letter and resumé. The Student Employment and Career Centre provides tips about how an employer treats a resumé. For example, because people read from top to bottom and from left to right, positions and places of employment should be listed on the left-hand side, and years should be listed on the right.

The cover letter should have at least one paragraph that demonstrates the applicant’s knowledge of the prospective employer, and a paragraph that describes how their qualifications match the position. “You want to leave them with the impression that they need you as much as you need them,” Thompson said. “If you are sending out a lot of applications, and not getting any interviews, that’s a good indication that there is something wrong with your cover letter and resumé.”

Thompson said job seekers should obtain permission from all of their references, and provide them with resúmes. Letters of recommendation should be written on company letterhead. Bring letters of recommendation, career portfolios, and work samples to the interview. A prospective employer might not ask for these things, but having them could be an advantage.

To locate opportunities, job seekers should use both the “visible” and “hidden” job markets. Thompson recommended making use of local employment centres and getting to know the people who work there. The people at these centres talk to employers daily, and are often asked to make recommendations. Stay on top of online job postings, and subscribe to job posting websites that specialize in matching jobs to an applicant’s particular qualifications.

Become active in on-campus activities and job fairs that provide opportunities to meet prospective employers. When meeting a prospective employer, job seekers should introduce themselves, talk about their qualifications, and try to walk away with some contacts. Take advantage of on-campus recruitment guides to find out about employer information sessions, and to get names of potential employers.

Networking is a particularly valuable prospecting tool. Look for the opportunity to connect with someone who might be able to assist with the job search. In any social situation—from shopping to hockey practice—a job seeker should ask, “What do you do, and where do you work?”

Job seekers must make it known that they are looking for work, and the kind of work they are looking for. Quoting from the magazine *Career Options*, Thompson said, “Networking is the single most successful way to build relationships that ultimately result in career opportunities.

If you don't learn to network, you won't get the work you want in the industry sector you have chosen."

The "visible job market" consists of advertisements, Internet sites, employment agencies, and job banks. However, this market represents only 20% of job opportunities, said Thompson. The other 80% are found in the "hidden job market," which consists of word-of-mouth, directories, professional associations, libraries, and the Yellow Pages.

"Job postings are very expensive for employers," Thompson said. "If they have a particular opportunity, they let everyone on their staff know. They might send out an email asking if someone can recommend someone for the position. The hidden job market is being in the right place at the right time." Professional development sessions and conferences like this one are also great places to get to know people.

Employers want to know that a potential employee is an energetic, active person in the community—not just a couch potato. Applicants who lack the particular skills or experience they need to go after the job they want should consider volunteering in related campus or community service activities, and extra-curricular activities.

Many people apply for jobs, but few follow up. Thompson said applicants should follow up about a week after submitting an application to check on its status, and find out if there is a short list or whether a decision has been made. Making such a call might prompt the employer to search through the resumé, and place that application at the top of the pile.

The University of Saskatchewan also has an interview guide that helps job seekers to prepare for the interview process. This guide is online, and is available to the general public. It helps with questions like "tell me about yourself." Participating in a mock interview will help keep an applicant from becoming nervous during a real interview.

The next step is to set up a tracking process. Thompson said applicants should keep a chart of the jobs they have applied for, when they applied, and when they should follow up. If there is no contact name, phone the general number and ask for the person in charge of hiring for the position.

Once the job search process starts to work, applicants will need to evaluate their job offers. They should ask about the nature of the work, the working conditions, whether accommodations need to be made, and when they will be in place. Find out whether there are opportunities for advancement, and whether the salary and benefits are sufficient. Learn about the corporate or company culture, and its reputation.

Get the job offer in writing so as to avoid any future problems or misunderstandings. If the nature of the work or the supervisor should change, it might be important to have a written record of the original agreement.

Applicants should treat employers with the same respect they want for themselves, so be ethical and professional. Do not accept an offer only to turn it down later.

Thompson summarized her top 10 job search strategies:

- Know yourself and your objectives
- Know the employer
- Prepare your job search tools
- Locate opportunities
- Network
- Identify and implement job search strategies
- Apply and follow up
- Prepare and practice presentations and interviews
- Keep track
- Evaluate offers

Thompson's final advice for job seekers is to keep at the process until a job offer is in place.

Disability in the Workplace: Effective Accommodation Planning

SPEAKER

Kristin Sali

Neil Squire Society

The Neil Squire Society is a not-for-profit organization that helps its clients remove obstacles and barriers so they can live independent lives and become active members of society. **Kristin Sali** assesses an individual's needs within the workplace, makes recommendations on appropriate and cost-effective technologies and products, and trains individuals in their proper use.

Treating people equally does not always mean treating them the same, said Sali. Human rights legislation in Canada requires employers, unions, and co-workers to accommodate the accessibility needs of people with disabilities. Accommodation is an ongoing process that involves tailoring work or education to meet the needs of an individual, and identifying and removing or minimizing the adverse effects of barriers in the workplace.

Accommodation can take many forms, such as making workplaces and facilities accessible, modifying a work schedule, or reconstructing or redistributing nonessential job functions. It might also necessitate acquiring or modifying equipment, providing qualified support service assistance when required, or changing a job location.

Sali uses a seven-stage model in her employment accommodation work: disclosure; assessment and needs identification; research and equipment trials; recommendations; the undue hardship test; implementation; and follow-up, review and adjustment.

She said disclosure is a person's choice, and can happen at any point in the employment process, or not at all. It is perfectly acceptable for an applicant or employee never to disclose a disability.

Deciding whether to disclose is a complex issue. Applicants must consider whether their disability will affect their ability to perform their required duties, the nature of the job, their qualifications, and the company and their policies. Choosing to disclose in one instance does not necessitate disclosing in every situation.

There are certain advantages to disclosing a disability, said Sali. Disclosure might give the applicant peace of mind. It also prepares the employer for potential issues, and allows the applicant access to accommodations. Applicants and employees are protected by law from changes in employment as a result of disclosing a disability.

When disclosing a disability, job seekers should be positive and focus on their skills, qualifications, and their ability to do the job. Anticipate any concerns the employer may have, and be prepared to provide information on accommodation resources including their availability and cost, and on funding programs for employers.

A thorough, on-site assessment is crucial to the success of any accommodation plan, said Sali. Such an assessment should consider a wide range of accommodation options. The accommodation specialist should meet the employee to discuss job duties, functional abilities

and current accommodations. The specialist should also meet with the supervisor to determine performance expectations for the employee, review the employee's job description and assess the employee's work habits, work station set-up, and work environment. Factors such as the demands of the job, the pace of work, and the culture of the workplace should be taken into consideration.

The process of researching accommodation options and equipment follows the assessment. Employees should evaluate the usefulness of special equipment, assistive devices, and workstations under regular working conditions. When working with employers to put together a list of possible accommodations, Sali uses the acronym ADAPTABLE: **a**ssistive **d**evelopments, **a**lternative formats, **p**ersonal support, **t**ransportation services, **a**daptable furniture, **b**uilding modifications, **l**ow-tech devices, and **e**nvironmental adaptations.

Assistive devices and alternative formats might include special keyboards or software, Braille or large print documents, or a document holder or talking calculator. An employer might provide a personal care attendant, or special-needs transportation for company events or functions. Adaptations to the building and environment might include desks or workstations to accommodate a wheelchair, ramps or grab-bars in the washrooms, and air purifiers or special office lighting.

The next step in the assessment process is the "undue hardship test." Undue hardship exists when removing the barriers to employment for an individual would significantly threaten the financial health of the organization, or the physical well-being of others. This test specifies the extent to which parties are responsible for ensuring that a person with a disability is accommodated. The test is measured by cost and health and safety risks, and requires the employer to demonstrate that all avenues for accommodating the individual have been explored and any suitable accommodations would not cause undue hardship.

If undue hardship is not an issue, the employer will need to implement the necessary accommodations. In some cases these measures require the co-operation of others. For instance, if the accommodation plan calls for job sharing, the union and co-workers might need to be included in the negotiations. If the plan includes computer-based assistive devices, the systems personnel should be consulted.

Once the employee is on the job, the final step of the process involves follow-up, review, and adjustment. This step ensures the employee's needs are being met and that any problems are being addressed. The review might lead to another assessment stage, or more equipment trials. If new accommodation needs are identified, the original plan might need to be revised.

Sali said employers often overestimate the cost of accommodations, assuming that people with disabilities depend on expensive and exotic technical aids. Some accommodations can be practical and very cost-effective: a hearing-impaired laboratory technician might need a \$30 indicator light that flashes when a timer sounds; a visually impaired employee might need adhesive-backed Braille labels on all elevator control panels, which cost only \$10; and someone who can type with only one hand might need a freeware program that allows the person to enter combination keystrokes sequentially.

Most of the time, the employer will pay for the accommodations, but that should not be a deterrent to hiring a disabled person. There are many sources of funding assistance, including Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, tax credits and incentives, and health insurance benefits. If an accommodation requires a sizable expense for an employer, Sali said the job seeker should learn about the available funding assistance so they can advise the employer of these options. Job seekers might make use of the Job Accommodation Service (JAS), a free Canada-wide service for workplace accommodation solutions.

Sali provided a list of websites where participants could find more information:

- [Diversity and Employment Equity: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat](#)
- [Handling Your Psychiatric Disability in Work and School: Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University](#)
- [The Job Accommodation Service \(JAS\)](#)
- [Telework and People with Disabilities: InnoVisions Canada](#)

Transitioning from School to Work

SPEAKER
Nicole Jacksic
BMO Financial Group

There are two key factors when transitioning from school to work, said **Nicole Jacksic**: “Understand yourself as a commodity, and nurture your own well-being.” Performing a self-assessment will give job seekers a better understanding of their skills, interests, personality, values, and the tangible and intangible characteristics that make them unique.

“You can’t sell something that you don’t understand,” she said.

Jacksic said job seekers should define their personal and professional goals through a self-questioning process. They must discover what motivates them, what interests them, and what they enjoy doing, and they should know their capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses.

Part of the self-assessment process is defining a professional brand, which is “how people describe you when you aren’t there.” The brand is the combination of tangible and intangible characteristics that make an individual unique; it is a collection of perceptions and impressions about that individual.

Body language, words, and tone demonstrate a person’s confidence, skill, trustworthiness, competence, and motivation. These factors make up the personal brand, which indicates how that person might work with others, and the kind of work that person might deliver.

Jacksic suggested participants define their career objectives by researching their career goals. Find out about a prospective employer’s business objectives, and the market challenges in that industry. Look into the culture of the workplace, the employer’s reputation, and ask why someone would want to work for them.

Jacksic said job seekers should get involved in experiential learning opportunities such as job shadowing, volunteer work, co-ops and internships, and mentoring. Define and commit to

specific and achievable actions towards attaining career goals. These actions might include networking, seeking out informational interviews, and volunteering.

Developing a professional brand and evaluating the chosen industry or career will give job seekers their career plan, Jacksic said.

She summarized the process points:

- Know yourself: evaluate your goals and skills, interests and values, strengths and areas for development.
- Focus on your uniqueness and your accomplishment. How you will add value in a way that someone else may not?
- Understand the current employment environment. Where are the opportunities, what are the growth industries and why?
- Have conversations and seek feedback; network and sustain mentoring relationships.
- Know the business. What are the issues, challenges and objectives for the industry, the company and the role?
- Create a plan: commit to an action plan based on specific and obtainable career goals.

Discussion

A participant asked if, after an unsuccessful application, she could assume that a company would keep her information on file and contact her when future opportunities arose.

No, said Sali. "Be prepared to apply again, and be sure to contact the company and ask them why you were not selected." Doing so will prepare the applicant for the next opportunity with that company.

Another participant asked about the difference between personal references and letters of reference, and the appropriate use of each.

Thompson said personal references should be listed on a resumé. She said applicants should give their references a copy of the resumé, so they know the applicant's range of skills and abilities. Letters of reference should be written on company letterhead, and presented to the interviewer who asks, "What would this person say about you?"

"I wear dark glasses due to a light-sensitivity disorder," said a participant. "How do I convey to an interviewer that I am not being impolite or rude by not removing my sunglasses?"

Dillon and Jacksic said that disclosure might be worthwhile in this case. Tell the potential employer the reason for the dark glasses so they will not be surprised at the interview, but be sure they know it will not affect job performance.

A participant asked how he should explain to an employer that his autism does not mean he is incapable of doing the job, even though it might appear so at the interview.

“Sell the employer on your education, skills, and abilities,” said Jacksic. Offer to take part in an internship program, or volunteer for a period of time. Applicants might ask members of their support network to contact the employer and vouch for their competence. They might use targeted intake programs that specialize in placing people with their disability. In this case, the Autism Resource Centre might be able to help.

One participant said she applied for a tour guide position and did not disclose her need for a scooter for mobility. “I didn’t get the position because I think, at the interview, the employer didn’t feel comfortable with having someone on a scooter doing that work. What could I have done differently?”

Thompson said if a potential employer seems unsure about an applicant’s capabilities, the applicant should try to reassure them, and emphasize their positive qualities. “Perhaps there could even be an advantage in your ability to zip around quicker,” she said.

“What is being done to provide sensitivity training for employers so that they are more aware of their obligations and responsibilities surrounding employing the disabled?” asked a participant.

Sali said the Neil Squire Society provides such training for employers, and also does visitations to workplaces to raise awareness. JAS also offers this service.

An increasing amount of documentation is available to demonstrate to employers the advantages of hiring people with disabilities, said Dillon. Statistics show that employees with disabilities take fewer sick days, they are more loyal to their employers and to the work, and the actual cost of accommodation is very low.

A participant asked for tips about applying for jobs online.

Submit resumés in text format only, said Thompson. Do not use bullets or bolding, but use capital letters for emphasis instead. Use only standard fonts (Courier 10 is best), and do not include graphics. Mirror the wording and language in the job description, and customize the resumé for the specific job.

“What can employers not ask during a job interview?” asked a participant.

Jacksic said an employer cannot ask anything about disability. They cannot ask in detail what accommodations might be required.

It is a delicate balance, said Dillon. “If you feel comfortable doing so, be prepared to mention what accommodations you use if you have a visible disability. If you have a non-visible disability, it is your individual choice as to what you discuss or disclose.”

A participant asked how to analyze job postings to see if they are good fit.

Thompson said applicants should evaluate the position based on their education, skills and experience, but they should not be too rigid. “If you can do three of the four things required in the job description, perhaps you could be trained for the fourth.”

Tips on Preparing for Interviews: What Recruiters Look For

SPEAKER

Suzanne Orieux-Koroluk
District People Manager, Saskatchewan
Walmart Canada

Suzanne Orieux-Koroluk thanked Dillon for the opportunity to attend the forum, not just to provide tips but also to network and meet people.

Orieux-Koroluk is responsible for all human resource functions at Walmart's 14 Saskatchewan stores. She has experience interviewing thousands of people. Walmart has 312 stores across Canada, and employs 82,000 people.

"We certainly believe that diversity is about creating a culture of inclusion that encourages the unique qualities of each associate, and celebrating how our differences bring value to our customers and to our workplace," she said.

When preparing for an interview, applicants should first identify what they want to do, and then find out what the company is about. "If that company doesn't fit for you, it won't be a good place to work, even if you have the skill set, and even if you have the education," she said.

Applicants should also understand what the available position entails. "We can go through life just working or we can go through life loving what we do," said Orieux-Koroluk. Applicants must know their value, and should communicate their salary expectations without selling themselves short.

Prepare for the interview by rehearsing: practice answering questions. Google is a great tool to research the type of questions that might be asked. Have friends and family ask questions and provide feedback; mock interviewing will help settle an applicant's nerves.

Applicants should know their resumés and understand how their experience is relevant to the job they are applying for, and they should prepare questions to ask the interviewer. At the end of the interview, employers typically ask candidates if they have any questions. If an applicant has researched the company, some questions should come to mind. Leaving the interview without asking questions could mean one of two things: the interviewer has answered all the questions the applicant might have had, or the applicant has not done any research.

Bring a resumé and list of references to the interview, and be sure to verify the references' contact information beforehand. Planning ahead is important. Dress appropriately for the position, and also for the company culture. Applicants should ask about the dress code when they are called for an interview.

"Remember to present yourself neat and tidy," said Orieux-Koroluk.

Being on time is absolutely critical. Be 10–15 minutes early, but not an hour early. Figure out how long it will take to get to the interview using whatever mode of transportation you plan to take on the day of the interview. Know what type of interview is planned and who will be interviewing you. Use the person's name upon meeting and throughout the interview.

There are a number of different types of interviews:

- An **exploratory** interview involves one-sided questions that require direct answers.
- A **behavioural** interview requires applicants to illustrate their answers using their own experience, and not hypothetical situations.
- A **scenario-based** interview involves hypothetical situations that require applicants to explain how they would manage the outcome or provide a solution.
- A **panel** interview involves questions from several interviewers.
- A **group** interview includes several candidates, and might involve role-playing or team activities. The employer will observe the applicants' behaviour and their reactions to different situations.

Interviews can be unstructured or structured. The unstructured interview might involve the interviewer talking a lot about the company, or about themselves. The structured interview is better, and would fall into one of the categories listed above. Orioux-Koroluk said participants should ask what type of interview to expect.

When answering questions in a behavioural interview, Orioux-Koroluk suggested using the STAR strategy:

- **Situation:** Explain the situation you were faced with.
- **Task:** Identify the problem, or change required.
- **Action:** Explain what action you took to address the problem.
- **Result:** Share the outcome and explain what you accomplished.

This method will ensure the applicant has covered all of the aspects the interviewer is looking for.

Employers are looking for a candidate who shows interest in the company and the position, and who meets the company's needs. They want to see someone who is adequately prepared for the interview, is engaged in the process, and demonstrates confidence and an understanding of self-value. Applicants should treat everyone positively, from the person who set up the interview to the person who greets them at the door.

Orioux-Koroluk said there are five opportunities to disclose a disability: the job application, the interview, after the job offer, after beginning work, and if a problem exists in the workplace.

"The only logical reason to disclose is if you need to request a reasonable accommodation from your employer to perform an essential function of the job," she said.

My Gift: The Challenges and Joys of a Mature Student and Social Worker with a Disability

SPEAKER

Mona Hill

Program Facilitator/Teacher

Regina Work Preparation Centre

Mona Hill said people have had difficulty understanding her all her life. Her grade school report cards noted her love of conversation, her brother used to tell her she never stopped talking, and her husband pointed out that she often interrupted people in conversation.

“I never understood what they were talking about,” she said.

Shortly after two of her sons were diagnosed with a learning disability, Hill discovered that she had one too. She decided to go back to university and graduated successfully, “but with accommodations.” She wrote a letter to the university outlining the barriers that existed and recommending some positive changes, and they implemented many of the changes she had suggested. She had copies of the letter to share with anyone who was interested.

“I’m amazed to find not everyone tackles challenges the way I do,” said Hill.

Hill hates numbers, because she cannot see them in her head. She has trouble remembering things, but did well as a telemarketer because she could talk to people. She has won awards for her sales skills. “People with disabilities learn to compensate. We find ways to go over, under, around barriers,” she said.

Addressing the issue of disclosing, Hill said she cannot help but wonder if she was chosen for her abilities “or was I chosen to be the token person with a disability?”

For one interview, she asked in advance if she could bring some notes with her, and the interviewer agreed. During the interview, she was told she could not refer to her notes because it would give her an unfair advantage over the other candidates. She was told later that she did not get the job because she had used notes. Hill said had she self-disclosed before the interview, they might have understood why her notes were a necessity.

That interview experience set her back. As a consequence, she decided to be upfront and to self-disclose on all future applications.

She encouraged participants to research a company before applying there, and to find out their attitude toward people with disabilities. Some companies simply have not thought about it before.

“Build on your strengths and highlight your capabilities,” she said. “My gift is the ability to focus on more than one conversation or task.” Positive self-talk and daily affirmations are two techniques Hill suggests. She wakes up every morning and says, “I have a lot to offer this world.”

She encouraged those who are seeking work in the human services field to find opportunities to work with other people with disabilities. She suggested participants use the organizations and agencies that offer support to people with disabilities such as Saskatchewan Independent Living, Saskatchewan Abilities Council, and Neil Squire Society.

"I consider my challenges to be a gift. Be aware of yourself. You deserve to be treated with dignity and respect," said Hill.

NEADS Web-Based Employment Resources

SPEAKER

Jennison Asuncion

National Educational Association of Disabled Students

Jennison Asuncion described the NEADS online work system (NOWS), which was launched in 2003. The service is free, and job seekers who self-disclose their disability or impairment can post their resumés and cover letters to the site at www.now.s.ca. NOWS also offers a job board, where job seekers can search and apply for employment opportunities. It includes over 1,800 registered students and graduates, and 113 registered employers representing 25 different industries in every province and territory.

The top sectors seeking employees with disabilities are government, administrative services/office help, social services, non-profit, customer service, and health care. Employers currently on NOWS include BMO Financial Group, Convergys, CTV, Export Development Canada, GE Canada, IBM Canada, Imperial Oil Limited, and SED Systems.

Asuncion also encouraged participants to apply for the Equity Through Education scholarship from BMO. The deadline to apply is December 17, 2009. More information is available at www.neads.ca.

Discussion

Dillon asked the panel to describe one aspect of their job that they do not enjoy, saying this is often a question employers will ask candidates in an interview. Hill answered "paperwork." She advised participants to be honest, and to be prepared to answer questions about likes and dislikes.

"Know your limitations in addition to your strengths," Orioux-Koroluk said. Asuncion said employers often want to know where the applicant wants to grow.

Dillon asked the panel to speak about networking.

Volunteering is a great opportunity to meet people in organizations that share similar passions, said Hill. "It looks great on your resumé and is a very valuable experience," she said.

Asuncion said he could attest to the value of volunteering, since all of his jobs have come about as a result of networking through volunteer work. "Volunteering is an important strategy," he said.

Hill said it also opens up educational opportunities. As a result of a volunteer position she holds, she was recently invited to a national conference and was able to participate for free.

“It’s okay to be excited about something you’ve never done before,” Orioux-Koroluk said.

“Communicate your enthusiasm about something the company has or offers that is of interest to you.”

Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP)

SPEAKER

Chris Gaulin

National Educational Association of Disabled Students

The Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP) is a federal government program that assists people with disabilities in saving for retirement. The program began in 2008, and consists of a grant and a bond.

“You don’t necessarily have to put money in, if your income is under a certain threshold,” **Chris Gaulin** said. Because students and recent graduates tend to have lower incomes, it is the perfect opportunity for them to begin saving.

The program allows others to contribute on behalf of the person with a disability as well. Parents, grandparents, spouses, and friends can all contribute, and the recipient will still be eligible for the grant, bond, or both.

A participant asked how to obtain these funds.

The plan must be set up through a financial institution, said Gaulin. The federal government will annually calculate an individual’s eligible funds; these calculations are based on income. He said there is no need to reapply every year.

Another participant asked if those with learning disabilities are also eligible for the RDSP.

Jennison Asuncion said that everyone who is eligible for the disability tax credit qualifies for the RDSP. Gaulin said participants should visit the RDSP website at www.rdsp.com for more detailed information.

A participant asked whether this program affects social programs and student loans.

Gaulin said that in Saskatchewan, as with most provinces, they are exempt. They will not be clawed back.

Another participant asked whether a change in government would result in the program being discontinued.

Gaulin said there is no guarantee, but the program is in place for at least the next three years. A change in government can often result in a change to programs. He pointed to the RESP as an example of one that has only grown over the years, and he said the RDSP would likely do the same.

Networking

SPEAKER

Jennison Asuncion

National Educational Association of Disabled Students

“Your brand is who you are and what you want people to know about you,” said Jennison Asuncion. It is often described as a “30-second elevator speech.” In less than 30 seconds, job seekers should be able to describe who they are, what they do, and what kind of work they are looking for.

Asuncion said he finds a business card to be one of the most useful tools in professional networking. He suggested participants should get an inexpensive business card that includes their name, permanent phone number, and an appropriate email address. One networking strategy is to provide contacts with two business cards—one for them to keep and one to pass on to someone else.

Job seekers must understand the difference between social and professional networking. Facebook is a social networking tool and should be used as such. Be careful about posting on Facebook, and check the security settings. Job seekers should ensure whatever is viewable by the public is something they would be comfortable with a potential employer seeing.

“How do you want to be known?” Asuncion asked.

By comparison, LinkedIn is a professional networking tool. Asuncion said he has a LinkedIn profile and has it printed on his business card.

“Networking is an investment,” he said. “You may not reap the benefits immediately.” A network has to be cared for, and job seekers must be active with the people in their network. Asuncion suggested job seekers note how they met the person and any other pertinent information on the back of each business card they receive. Stay in touch with that person. Gather people from different networks for lunch, dinner or coffee. Keep people informed through periodic emails or status updates.

Networking is a “two-way street,” said Asuncion. Job seekers should be sure to show appreciation to their network, thank those who do them favours, and return the favour if possible.

He said participants should begin building their networks now. “Students you hang out with now could end up being your professional network later on.”

Final Tips for Your Job Search

SPEAKER

Jennifer Dillon

National Educational Association of Disabled Students

Jennifer Dillon said participants must develop a good support system to help them through their job search. A job search takes effort and energy, and a strong support system is essential. She encouraged participants to build their professional brand. “Put some thought into what your strengths are, and what you want people to know about you,” she said.

Think about disclosure and what accommodations might be required to perform the job. Job seekers should be ready to confidently present this information to a potential employer.

Networking—and building that network as students—is crucial.

Dillon said participants should prepare for interviews, and know what to expect. Those who are not getting the response they had hoped for should consider adjusting their strategy. Those who are not getting called for interviews should revise their resumés. Those who are getting interviews but not getting job offers should polish their interview skills.

Participants moving into the next stage of their job search should keep an open mind, said Dillon. “Always put your best foot forward. Recognize the small rewards. Over time they’ll add up. Career development is a journey.”