

WHAT WORKS:

Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

Persons with Learning Disabilities

Statistics	1
Context	2
Terminology and definitions	2
History and legislation	3
Types of learning disabilities	3
Co-existing diagnoses	5
Barriers and challenges	5
Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices	6
Qualities of effective counsellors	7
Communicating with clients	7
Career planning approaches	8
Assessment	9
Helping clients with education	10
Focusing on Employment	11
Helping clients prepare for work search	11
Disclosure to employers	13
Dealing with employers	15
Job accommodations	16
Employment supports	17
In Conclusion	19
Endnotes	19

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Statistics

Percentage of Albertans aged 15 and over who reported a learning disability in 2006	13.4% ¹
Percentage of Canadians aged 20 to 29 who did not complete high school	28.3% with learning disabilities 14.3% of general population ²
Rate at which persons with learning disabilities report depression, anxiety disorders or suicidal thoughts	2 to 3 times more than the general population ³
Estimate of percentage of adults with learning disabilities in Canada	30%–70% in prisons 25%–40% on income support 15%–30% in job training programs ⁴
The proportion of persons with disabilities in Alberta, ages 15 and over	14.8% in 2001 15.8% in 2006 ⁵
Participation in the labour force of persons with disabilities in 2006	69.6% of Albertans 56.2% of Canadians ⁶
Persons with disabilities who felt their condition limited their ability to work in 2006	12.6% of Albertans 9.9% of Canadians ⁷

Context

Disabilities in *What Works* chapters

In *What Works*, disabilities are discussed in four separate chapters:

Persons with Developmental Disabilities

Includes persons with general developmental disabilities, as well as autism, Asperger disorder and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

Persons with Learning Disabilities

Includes persons with disorders in functional use of oral and written language, reading and mathematics, as well as non-verbal learning disorders (NLD)

Persons with Physical and Neurological Disabilities

Physical disabilities includes sight, hearing and mobility disabilities, as well as chronic pain and autoimmune diseases

Neurological disabilities includes acquired brain injury (ABI), epilepsy, Tourette syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Persons with Mental Health Disabilities

Includes persons with anxiety disorders, eating disorders, mood disorders, personality disorders, schizophrenia, problem gambling and substance abuse, as well as co-existing diagnoses

Counsellors may wish to read all four chapters for information and ideas that may be helpful for their client group.

Living with learning disabilities

“It was once believed that learning disabilities were a childhood disorder. We now know that this is not true—learning disabilities are lifelong and can affect friendships, school, work, self-esteem and daily life.”⁸

Terminology and definitions

Disability is defined by Statistics Canada as an “activity limitation or participation restriction associated with a physical or mental condition or health problem.”⁹

Learning disabilities (LD) refers to a number of disorders that may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or non-verbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.¹⁰

A *non-verbal learning disorder* (NLD) is also a neurological disorder that originates in the right hemisphere of the brain. Reception of non-verbal or performance-based information governed by this hemisphere is impaired in varying degrees, causing problems with visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative, and holistic processing functions.¹¹

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- oral language (listening, speaking, understanding)
- reading (decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension)
- written language (spelling and written expression)
- mathematics (computation, problem solving)

History and legislation

Prior to the early 1960s, there was no recognized field of learning disabilities. Children demonstrating difficulties with learning were given a variety of labels, including “minimally brain damaged” or “perceptually impaired.”

The learning disabilities movement began to gather strength after its inception in 1963. A general orientation to the education of exceptional children was developed and included the following elements:

- Individual differences in learning should be understood by looking at the different approaches to learning tasks.
- Educational interventions should be tailored to individual children and their processing strengths and weaknesses.
- Children with deficient learning processes might be helped to learn by strengthening deficient processes or by developing teaching methods that avoid stressing weak areas.¹²

The learning disabilities movement is now solidly supported in law, it has an enormous number of well-informed advocates and professionals working on its behalf, and it is the subject of challenging and useful research.¹³

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Section 15 guarantees equality rights and freedom from discrimination for people who have a mental or physical disability, as well as for other categories of people who face discrimination.

Employment Equity Act

The *Employment Equity Act* defines persons with disabilities as individuals who have a long-term or recurring physical, mental, sensory, psychiatric or learning impairment, and who consider themselves to be disadvantaged in employment by reason of that impairment, or believe that an employer or potential employer is likely to consider them to be disadvantaged in employment by reason of that impairment.¹⁴ Because this is a federal act, it is limited in scope and applies only to industries that are federally regulated.

Duty to accommodate

Duty to accommodate refers to the legal obligation to take appropriate steps to eliminate discrimination resulting from a rule, practice or barrier that has—or can have—an adverse impact on individuals with disabilities. A similar duty applies to other areas, such as reasonable accommodation for religious differences. Efforts to accommodate are required up to the point where the person or organization attempting to provide accommodation would suffer undue hardship by doing so. Undue hardship occurs if accommodation would create onerous conditions for an employer or service provider, for example, intolerable financial costs or serious disruption to business.¹⁵

Types of learning disabilities

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to

- language processing
- phonological processing (the system or pattern of sounds of a specific language)
- visual-spatial processing
- processing speed
- memory and attention
- executive functions, such as planning and decision making

Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception and social interaction.

Common characteristics of learning disabilities

Learning disabilities

- are lifelong
- are due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors or injuries that alter brain functioning
- may co-exist with various other conditions including attentional, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions
- can be remediated, compensated for and accommodated¹⁶

Learning disabilities may be evident in academic, employment and social situations. They affect people's ability to interpret what they see and hear or to connect information from different parts of the brain. While no individual will demonstrate all of these characteristics, some common signs of learning disabilities in adults are

- difficulty reading, writing, spelling
- inability to complete a job application form
- inability to follow written directions
- inability to remember several verbal directions
- problems putting thoughts down on paper
- feelings of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem
- difficulty finding or keeping a job
- difficulty budgeting and managing money
- time management difficulties
- short attention span, restlessness or hyperactivity
- difficulty understanding appropriate social behaviour
- poor co-ordination and spatial disorientation
- difficulty with problem solving strategies¹⁷

Frequently a clue to the presence of a learning disability is inconsistency, "a noticeable difference between areas where they function well and those where they don't. For example, a child who may be able to express himself very well out loud, but the child can't write coherently."¹⁸ Inconsistency may also be demonstrated through differences between tested potential and performance.

All of us exhibit some of the behaviours listed above at some time. The presence of one or more of these may not be significant. However, if a cluster of these behaviours occurs in one individual, an assessment may be required.

A client's work and educational history and/or social behaviours also provide keys to the presence of learning disabilities. The following checklists provide another resource for identifying learning disabilities.

Clients presenting several of the following in work and education areas may have a learning disability:

- exhibits high potential but poor performance
- often unemployed or underemployed
- no specific career plans
- frequently late and/or absent
- cannot organize belongings, time, activities or responsibilities
- academic failure
- problems starting/completing plans and assignments
- learns well when shown, but cannot follow written and/or verbal instructions
- needs ongoing encouragement and support¹⁹

A person who has difficulties with social skills may have a learning disability. The person may also lack social skills, have difficulty maintaining relationships or use social skills to mask poor performance. In addition, the person may

- seem constantly anxious, tense, depressed
- have poor self-concept
- participate in few social activities
- have difficulty interpreting social cues
- be demanding
- be withdrawn; a loner
- have poor concept of personal space
- be impulsive
- exhibit age-inappropriate behaviour
- seem frustrated
- have an inability to sit still
- be insecure, fearful
- take things literally²⁰

"The most important starting point is becoming fully aware of the nature and severity of a client's learning disability and what role it plays at work, at home or in school."²¹ Many resources are available to help clients learn about the impact of disabilities. "At the same time it is important not to assume that all difficulties one may be experiencing are due to a learning disability—most people, with or without learning disabilities, often face daily challenges that at times seem overwhelming."²²

Non-verbal learning disorders (NLD)

As mentioned earlier, a non-verbal learning disorder “is a neurological disorder which originates in the right hemisphere of the brain. Reception of non-verbal or performance-based information governed by this hemisphere is impaired in varying degrees, causing problems with visual-spatial, intuitive, organizational, evaluative, and holistic processing functions.”²³

The syndrome of NLD consists of specific elements that include

- early speech and vocabulary development
- remarkable rote memory skills
- attention to detail
- early development of reading skills and excellent spelling skills
- eloquent verbal ability
- strong auditory retention²⁴

Persons with NLD may experience

- motoric deficits shown in lack of co-ordination, problems with balance and graphomotor skills
- visual-spatial-organizational deficits indicated by lack of image, poor visual recall, faulty spatial perceptions and difficulty with spatial relations
- social deficits shown in inability to comprehend non-verbal communications, difficulty adjusting to transitions and novel situations, and problems with social judgment²⁵

Co-existing diagnoses

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may co-exist with a learning disability.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is a term used to describe the range of disabilities that can result from prenatal exposure to alcohol. FASD is not a diagnosis. It is an umbrella term that encompasses

- fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)
- partial FAS (pFAS) or fetal alcohol effects (FAE)
- alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND)
- alcohol-related birth defects²⁶

For more information on FASD, see the chapter in *What Works* titled Persons with Developmental Disabilities.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is considered both a developmental disability and a neurological disability that interferes with a person’s ability to sustain attention or focus on a task and to control impulsive behaviour. Problems with executive functioning can be more of a problem than attention, hyperactivity and impulsiveness, especially in later life. Executive functioning skills are required more in adulthood and can often become a major issue for many adults diagnosed with ADHD.²⁷

For more information on ADHD, see the chapter in *What Works* titled *Persons with Physical and Neurological Disabilities*.

Barriers and challenges

Building hope

“Generally, clients with learning disabilities are long-term unemployed and are disenchanted. It is important to address that disenchantment by including activities to build self-esteem, self-enhancement and self-confidence as well as specific skills related to employment.”

Dr. R. Gall

Former Executive Director, Champions Career Centre

The secondary reactions to living with a learning disability can sometimes be more difficult to deal with than the disability itself. Many, but not all, people with learning disabilities differ from their typical peers in some areas of social competence and are not held in as high regard as others by their peers.²⁸

Social skills

Persons with learning disabilities are often unable to read social cues effectively. They may be labelled as social misfits, loners or as having behavioural problems.²⁹ Many adults with learning disabilities report they are unhappy with their social lives, have difficulty making and keeping friends, do not participate in social events and generally have limited social contacts.³⁰ The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) advocates actively teaching children who have learning disabilities the social skills that will be of great benefit to them, not only socially but also academically. Adults with learning disabilities also benefit from direct teaching of social skills, especially those skills that contribute to success in the workplace.

Emotional health

Adults with LD may be at risk for serious emotional health problems.³¹ These adults often report experiencing high levels of distress, anxiety, depression and frustration, along with feelings of failure and helplessness. They not only have to deal with functional limitations but also may have to *prove* their disabilities, which are essentially invisible. Anger can also grow when individuals with disabilities are expected to perform in situations that don't reflect their true abilities.

Assumptions about intelligence and career goals

“One of the most pervasive and damaging assumptions a person with learning disabilities may face at school or at work is that learning disabilities are linked to low intelligence. Parents, teachers, counsellors and eventually, employers, may impede the personal, academic and career development of persons with learning disabilities if the nature and impact of learning disabilities are not understood.”³²

Many persons with learning disabilities possess average or above-average intelligence. Although many are gifted, their talents and skills often remain underused because their disabilities may be undiagnosed and/or misunderstood.

It has been found that persons with learning disabilities are as likely to be employed as their peers, but they generally tend to work in lower skilled occupations and make less money.³³ Persons with learning disabilities may have lower career aspirations than their peers even though they have the skills and potential to succeed. Males with learning disabilities were twice as likely as their peers to seek low-prestige occupations, and females with learning disabilities also had proportionally lower occupational aspirations than their peers.³⁴ Implications are that students with learning disabilities who hold low perceptions of self-efficacy may not feel confident enough to pursue careers, even when they have the skills, attitudes and abilities necessary to succeed.³⁵

Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

What do I wish I would have known when I started working with persons with learning disabilities?

“I wish that I would have known about the issue of diverse presentations. Sometimes we get ‘pigeon-holed’ thinking that all people with learning disabilities are the same. And they’re not, not at all. Everyone is so different. The issue of behavioural presentation can be very confusing. I learned about learning disabilities through working with people.”

Brian Mader

Alberta Employment and Immigration

Qualities of effective counsellors

Counsellors' personal beliefs

Basic beliefs about persons with learning disabilities influence how counsellors relate to clients. Reflect on your own values, beliefs and assumptions with respect to learning disabilities as an aspect of social identity.

Career counselling is likely to be effective when based on these ideas:

- Each person with a learning disability deserves to be treated as a unique individual.
- Labels should be avoided whenever possible.
- Persons with learning disabilities, no matter how disabled, have a limitless potential for becoming not what we desire them to be, but what it is within them to become.
- There are many ways to accomplish the same task. Be open to the possibilities and exercise creativity.
- Everyone has some form of disability. Career development can be a vehicle for growth for persons with disabilities.
- It is important to emphasize abilities, not disabilities, and to examine how society defines success.
- People can change or modify their jobs to focus on abilities and to avoid shortcomings.
- Accommodations are seldom a costly venture, and these modifications can benefit other employees as well.³⁶

Communicating with clients

For effective client interactions, counsellors may want to adapt their communications strategies using these suggestions:

- Keep background noise to a minimum. Meet in a room with a door, if possible.
- Provide a structure for your meeting and for each step in the counselling process. (A client with a learning disability often does not know where to begin.)
- Speak clearly in a normal tone of voice. Be direct and specific. Divide what you have to say into small sections and pause between sections.

- Use plain language, both written and verbal, when communicating.
- Repeat what you have to say.
- Express what you have to say in a simpler vocabulary if clients have trouble understanding.
- Ask clients how they would prefer to receive information from you, such as in writing, in person, over the phone or all three. Consider taping meetings so clients can review them at home.
- Check often with clients for understanding. Have them repeat information back to you to confirm their understanding.
- Use as many modalities as possible when meeting with clients: tell clients, show clients and, if possible, let them practise what you are telling them.
- Be patient.
- Use a step-by-step approach.
- Describe the details.
- Convey belief in clients. Encouragement is particularly vital to clients with a learning disability. Let them know that you understand the impact of their disability and, at the same time, believe they can succeed.³⁷

Helping clients with non-verbal learning disorders (NLD)

Counsellors may want to consider the following when working with clients with NLD:

- clearly state your expectations
- use computers as a tool and when appropriate
- follow consistent scheduling
- arrange facilitated group activity
- encourage or introduce mentorship opportunities
- provide the client with logical explanations for change
- have clients consider organizational skills coaching
- suggest that clients undertake social skills training
- accompany visual material with verbal explanation³⁸

Career planning approaches

The counsellor's task is to help clients with learning disabilities increase their chances for gaining and maintaining satisfying work by helping them to

- identify their strengths and special skills
- identify their preferred future, including preferred work choices
- recognize their disabilities, if they do not already
- understand their disabilities and how they might affect work situations
- identify any coping strategies they have developed to address challenges they face at work
- identify appropriate assistive devices and additional strategies to address work challenges
- make attainable work choices that relate to their preferred future

The following are suggestions for working with clients with learning disabilities:

- When interviewing clients, ask them about their whole life, from birth to present. Pay attention to education experiences, medical background and social experiences.
- If possible, involve significant people in clients' lives in the process, including partners, family members, employers and co-workers. This provides a broader perspective of issues and demonstrates a collaborative, co-operative approach.
- Gather all available documentation regarding clients. Everyone comes with a history, and getting to know a client's history helps counsellors understand the developmental perspective.
- Learning disabilities are forever. They don't go away. Help clients identify their strengths.
- To understand and help clients build on their strengths, counsellors must take the time to get to know clients.

Strength-based approach

The counsellor's challenge is to help clients understand their strengths and their disabilities in relationship to the employment options they may be considering and/or help them assess their strengths and limitations and then identify and explore employment options.

In conjunction with recognizing and building on their strengths, clients with learning disabilities benefit from becoming aware of and acknowledging their disabilities and the difficulties and performance issues that are related to them. This knowledge, in turn, allows them to plan strategies to compensate for such difficulties.

Use questions to identify what accommodations clients have developed on their own.

If clients have difficulty identifying their own strengths, ask the following, or similar, questions:

- What has worked for you before?
- What's happening right now?
- What have you been thinking about as far as work goes?
- How do you manage your work or daily life?
- If you could take pictures of your future, what would you like to see in those pictures?³⁹

Success factors

Successful persons with learning disabilities seek and gain control of their lives and related issues. Their pursuit of control is related to their desire to succeed, their goal orientation and their reframing of the experience of having a learning disability into a more positive experience. The key problem adults with learning disabilities face is not the disability itself but rather their inability to confront the various challenges they encounter as they learn to live with and overcome the disability.⁴⁰

Learned creativity is a critical factor in predicting employment success. "If you could survive childhood, dyslexia was a pretty good business boot camp. It fostered risk taking, problem solving, and resilience. School was a chess game that required tactical brilliance."⁴¹

Using compensatory strategies "involves utilizing individual strengths to bypass a particular weakness... for example, using checklists to compensate for poor memory."⁴² Success for persons with learning disabilities is related to their ability to develop such compensatory strategies.⁴³

Reframing to see the disability in a more positive way is another critical skill. The process of reframing includes

- recognizing one's disability
- understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses
- acceptance
- setting a plan of action toward reaching goals⁴⁴

Another aspect relating to control includes the drive for self-determination. For persons with learning disabilities, this drive includes developing personally adaptive approaches to meet the demands of their environment both in the community and at work. Counsellors can assist in this process by promoting self-awareness and self-understanding for these clients.⁴⁵

The quality of the client's belief system is also a critical factor in determining the success of an employment action plan.⁴⁶ In the theory of *learned helplessness*, clients may learn to feel helpless if outcomes occur that are unrelated to their actions. On the other hand, competent clients acknowledge the challenges their disability presents and the barriers they face in gaining employment and achieving promotions and attribute their successes and failures to the effort they invested.

Here are additional suggestions you can implement when counselling clients with learning disabilities:

- Generate a discussion on the client's interests, hopes, and dreams.
- Never make assumptions about the client.
- Explore the client's presenting limitations and solutions to problems.
- Talk with the client about general employment information, such as jobs available and training required.
- Focus on the client's skills and interests to direct them to job possibilities.
- Arrange for job tryouts for clients.
- Explore reworking or trading job duties to accommodate the client and co-workers.
- Explore win-win scenarios for the client.

Clients' financial concerns

Some clients with learning disabilities may receive income from income support systems, such as a pension plan, a long-term disability pension or government income support. Persons with disabilities who receive income from these sources may have the qualifications and the desire to work, but they may also fear jeopardizing their benefits if they take a full-time job. Many clients may be especially concerned about the loss of health benefits. In addition, some fear difficulties in reinstating benefits if the job does not last.

Individuals who receive financial assistance in Alberta are encouraged to maximize self-sufficiency, which usually means employment. Individuals who are working while receiving financial assistance may receive a supplement to their earnings. In other words, a portion of their wages may be exempt when their benefits are calculated. In Alberta, people leaving financial assistance for jobs may continue to receive health benefits both for themselves and their children.

So, while loss of health benefits may still be a concern for clients, it may not be a reality. Counsellors are encouraged to become familiar with details of financial assistance programs and help clients to get more information about income exemptions and health coverage.⁴⁷

Assessment

When to refer for assessment

"Trust your intuition. If you think it [learning disability] is there, it quite likely is. Diagnosis is really important. For many adults, diagnosis is a huge relief."

Brian Mader

Alberta Employment and Immigration

Often an important first step in the career planning process for clients in this population is having a professional assessment completed.

“Learning disabilities should be formally diagnosed by a registered psychologist with advanced training in the learning disabilities field. The diagnosis is based on information collected during a comprehensive psychoeducational assessment. The main purpose of the assessment is to determine the specific nature and extent of academic difficulties, such as dyslexia, and to identify, as closely as possible, a specific brain mechanism that is responsible for these difficulties, such as phonological processing.”⁴⁸

Psychoeducational assessment

A valid learning disability assessment includes a

- medical history (for example, head injuries, exposure to environmental toxins)
- developmental history (for example, onset of developmental milestones, such as walking and talking)
- education history (for example, school grades, type of remedial instruction provided)
- performance on measures of specific mental processes (for example, auditory discrimination)
- performance on measures of academic achievement (for example, reading comprehension)⁴⁹

The assessment also needs to take into account the fact that most adults have been out of school for years and in many cases never received adequate schooling in the first place. This is one reason why assessing adult learning disabilities is much more challenging than assessing school-aged learning problems.⁵⁰

Benefits of assessment

The benefits of having an assessment completed for clients with learning disabilities include the following:

- Clients enjoy a sense of relief and reassurance when a cause of their difficulties is identified.
- Clients’ self-esteem can benefit from the discovery and identification of unexpected strengths and talents that have been unrecognized or undervalued.
- The focus is shifted away from hiding problems to identifying effective strategies to address difficulties.

- Effective interventions can be planned after identifying a profile of specific strengths and challenges related to learning disabilities.
- Counsellors and clients can determine eligibility for related funding, programming, training and testing accommodations.⁵¹

Referrals

For information regarding referrals for assessment, counsellors can consult the local learning disabilities association in their area or the national office of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada. It is important to ensure that the assessment is completed by a professional experienced in dealing with the age group in which the client falls. Psychologists who have worked extensively with children with learning disabilities may have very limited experience working with adults with learning disabilities.

Helping clients with education

As a result of the diagnostic and remedial services offered to children with learning disabilities, there is a growing number of adults with learning disabilities with complete, or almost complete, secondary school credentials. While young adults with learning disabilities are typically less likely than their peers to attend post-secondary institutions, the numbers of those attending are rising.⁵²

At the same time, many young adults with learning disabilities have not succeeded within the education system. There are still many adults with learning disabilities who may have passed through or left the education system before special programs were in place to help them deal with their disabilities and, as a result, are inadequately trained. These adults tend to be vulnerable in the labour market. Many of them are undiagnosed and, although they are likely aware of their difficulties, they are also unable to identify the cause. Many of these adults are represented in literacy and basic education programs.

Reports on persons with learning disabilities who complete post-secondary education indicate that employment rates are comparable to their peers and some rates exceed those of peers who have not completed post-secondary training. In addition, the reported salaries of post-secondary graduates with

learning disabilities exceed reported salaries of adults with learning disabilities who are not graduates of post-secondary programs.⁵³

Upgrading, training and retraining may all be within the reach of clients with learning disabilities. Check with the adult education programs in your area. Many post-secondary institutions offer services for students with learning disabilities that may include

- volunteers to make audio recordings of written work or books
- volunteers to edit written work
- access to appropriate technical aids
- information regarding assessments
- accommodations for completing exams⁵⁴

The National Educational Association of Disabled Students provides information regarding services and programs available to students with learning disabilities at Canadian post-secondary institutions.⁵⁵

Focusing on Employment

Helping clients prepare for work search

Counsellors can encourage these employment planning activities:

- Help clients become organized to address memory and learning challenges.
- Encourage clients to complete one task, uninterrupted, before starting another task.
- Encourage clients to develop step-by-step checklists that they can follow to complete tasks.
- Ask clients if they use watches, alarm clocks, calendars and daytimers. Help them access and learn to use these tools.
- Help clients access personal organizers with voice recognition and speech output capabilities. Such adaptive technology allows them to record, store and convert verbal information to a text format on a computer.
- Help clients access recording devices to tape sessions as memory aids.⁵⁶

Action plans

To help clients prepare and carry out employment action plans, consider these steps:

- Transform information for clients:
 - identify specific tasks
 - create logical steps
 - streamline steps
 - create a memory device to cue steps
- Never exceed seven as the maximum number of sub-steps for any one step.
- Begin each step with an action verb.
- Describe and model each strategy, talking aloud as you model.
- Coach clients in each step and provide feedback to clients on their performance.
- Ensure feedback is specific with regard to correct execution and specific suggestions for improvement.
- Have clients practise and master each step separately prior to combining and performing the entire sequence of steps.
- Have clients practise appropriate social behaviours for each strategy.
- Complete all practise sessions in the counselling setting.
- Involve clients in group sessions of modelling.
- Ensure support strategies are in place for clients. For example, for young clients, include parents or guardians.
- Emphasize mastery of performance.
- Emphasize client responsibility for performance.
- Facilitate client learning of prerequisite skills, for example, learning computer skills.
- Teach optimistic self-talk and help clients positively reframe pessimistic self-talk.
- Present errors as an opportunity to learn positive problem solving. This strategy helps clients develop optimism and confidence when facing setbacks.

Time management

Clients may lack the self-monitoring skills to recognize their limitations in this area. The following suggestions have proven to be helpful, particularly for career planning and job search:

- List in detail all the steps to be taken in the job search process.
- Prioritize steps to be undertaken—what must be done first, second and third.
- Set dates for the completion of each agreed-upon step.
- Be patient. Clients may need several tries at properly sequencing lists.
- Transfer the same information into a week-at-a-glance daytimer.
- Encourage clients to keep the corrected prioritized list in a safe place, for example, filed at home.
- Review at each meeting the steps for the upcoming week. Break these steps into further detail, as required.
- Schedule each detailed step into a fixed day and time.
- Use a system of audiotapes to record schedules for clients who have difficulty with reading and/or writing.⁵⁷

Completing application forms

Here are some strategies to help clients complete employment application forms:

- Help clients develop a resumé.
- Encourage them to use the resumé as an alternative to application forms whenever possible.
- Help clients learn the meaning and spelling of words commonly used on application forms.
- Encourage clients who can read and write with some confidence to take extra care in completing applications to avoid making errors.
- Encourage clients to use an erasable black fine-tip pen, an eraser and whiteout for making corrections. A small ruler and a spelling dictionary are also helpful.

- Help clients practise following the directions on a variety of application forms so that they get used to following the instructions.
- Suggest to clients that when they come to questions that don't apply to them, they can simply leave a blank space or write in a dash. Remind them that sometimes it is better to leave a blank space rather than an answer that could be easily misunderstood or could cost them the interview. Remind clients that they may have an opportunity to address such questions in an interview.
- Clients who have difficulty reading or writing can ask for application forms to be mailed to them or they can pick up application forms. Later they can receive help completing the forms.
- For application forms that must be filled out at the workplace, clients can carry with them a standard application form that is already filled out. The information can be copied onto the employers' forms. Counsellors can help clients prepare the standard form.
- Another option is for clients to list all pertinent information clearly on a sheet of paper so that they can copy the information onto the employers' forms. Counsellors will want to help clients prepare the list of pertinent information.

Preparing for a job interview

Confirm with clients that they have essential information and plans to be successful. Be sure they are prepared for the interview by knowing the following:

- exact name, address and phone number of the company
- the date and time of the interview
- the time necessary to leave home in order to reach the interview at least ten minutes early
- how to get there
- where to park (if applicable)
- the name of the person to ask for

Other activities may include the following:

- Discuss with clients whether or not they plan to disclose their learning disabilities at interviews.
- Help clients practise talking about their disabilities if they plan to disclose their learning disabilities at interviews.
- Practise role-playing job interviews with clients, using recording devices if possible.
- Help clients understand and meet appropriate standards of grooming and dress.⁵⁸

Research and preparation

The *right* work for all clients is work that relates to their preferred futures and, at the same time, allows them to maximize their potential. Clients need to understand all aspects of the job they are considering. To find the right work for them, encourage clients to obtain written job descriptions and then to

- analyze the tasks involved
- identify how their skills and strengths will be assets in the position
- anticipate possible challenges
- identify strategies to address challenges. For example, does the job demand typing, writing, driving, speed or memorization? If so, how will the client handle those requirements?

Clients also need to research the working environment. Someone with visual motor problems might be uncomfortable working in a cluttered area. A person with an auditory perceptual problem may choose to avoid situations with a high background noise level. Clients need to find environments that allow them to succeed.

Encourage clients to learn about government agencies and corporations that do business with the prospective employers. Employers with government contracts are usually required to have employment equity programs.

Clients also need to find out as much as possible about organizations they are considering for employment. Suggest that clients ask the organization if they have hired employees with disabilities before or if there is a high staff turnover.

Disclosure to employers

People with learning disabilities are often reluctant to disclose. They are concerned that disclosure may limit job prospects or advancement opportunities due to misconceptions, stereotypes or generalizations. They are also concerned that they may be offered a token position to fill an employment equity target. They would rather be hired for their abilities, not their disabilities.⁵⁹

About disclosure

“The acceptance of having a learning disability is a process. For clients, talking about or disclosing a learning disability is part of that process, as it evokes their feelings related to having a learning disability. Talking about their learning disability is a skill and counsellors can help clients practise this skill. Of the clients with learning disabilities that I have worked with, the most successful in the workplace have figured out a way to talk about their learning disability in a positive way. They have been able to build allies and elicit support by talking about what they can do. It’s important to remind clients that an employer will hire you for what you can do, not what you can’t do.”

Brian Mader

Alberta Employment and Immigration

Some clients do not need to disclose because they have implemented personal strategies and accommodations to compensate for their idiosyncratic learning styles. However, there are others who have no choice but to disclose in order to pass employment entrance tests, complete job advancement courses or complete assigned work within narrowly established parameters. Many would be able to perform more efficiently on the job if they were able to arrange for some simple accommodations, such as a quieter workspace, access to a computer, or instructions in alternative formats.

Ultimately, the choice to disclose rests with the individual with learning disabilities, who must evaluate each situation based on thorough research of diverse factors that include

- personal needs
- job descriptions
- possible accommodations required during or after the selection process
- the organization's sensitization to disability issues

Perhaps the more important question an individual with learning disabilities must ask is not whether to tell or not to tell, but rather the consequences of not telling. Can the person with learning disabilities do the job or derive benefit from a post-secondary educational program without accommodations? If the answer is no, the individual with learning disabilities (or the parent, guardian or advocate) needs to consider the following:

- How severe is the learning disability?
- How much does the nature or manifestation of the disability conflict with the needs of the job or educational program?
- How open is the employer or educational program to recognizing and accommodating individuals with learning disabilities?
- If there is a union in the workplace, what is its position toward and willingness to support members with learning disabilities?

If clients wish to have accommodations made on the job, disclosure will be necessary. Also relevant is the fact that talking about the disability in an interview or on an application form can shift the focus from the abilities to disabilities.⁶⁰

The following suggestions regarding disclosing information to prospective employers may be useful:

- Do not use medical terms, but describe the disability by its job-related outcomes, such as "I have difficulty following written instructions but no trouble at all following verbal directions."
- Have a current assessment of their disabilities with recommendations of how they may be accommodated on the job.
- Know and state individual strengths.
- Know individual needs in relation to the job.
- Look for support and networking opportunities in the workplace.
- Understand the role of the union, if applicable.
- Understand that asking for accommodations is a reasonable request.⁶¹

"Disclosing a learning disability requires a lot of thought and planning. Persons with learning disabilities should carefully plan how they wish to disclose and know the implications of this action. Employees and/or candidates may first want to reveal a little bit of information at a time in order to establish a level of comfort and trust. Ultimately, the candidate must decide the time, the place and the degree of information to share with others."⁶²

Dealing with employers

Employers can be encouraged to hire persons with learning disabilities for the following benefits:

- *Competitive advantage.* Employees and their networks represent a cross-section of potential customers.
- *Unique perspectives and creativity.* Skills developed in overcoming obstacles and compensating for deficits are an asset to the business.
- *Improve company image.* Hiring persons with disabilities improves the community's impression of that business. Good corporate citizenship is an important trend right now.
- *Larger human resource pool.* By using new technologies and accessing employment specialists, these employees make valuable contributions to the workplace.
- *Improved workplace culture.* A diverse workplace is more interesting and rewarding.
- *Preparation for the future.* Learning how to accommodate employees with disabilities now prepares businesses for accommodating aging customers with disabilities for the future.⁶³

Collaboration among counsellors, clients and employers to facilitate successful work placement and performance is considered a valuable approach. The following suggestions may help:

- Involve employers in sessions with clients as appropriate, for example to clarify work roles and expectations and to avoid misunderstandings.
- Involve employers and clients in discussions regarding strategies to compensate for and accommodate learning disabilities.
- Ensure discussions with clients and employers focus on client strengths and minimize disabilities by identifying appropriate strategies to address disabilities.
- Encourage employers to allow clients with learning disabilities to participate in job tryouts. This approach allows clients to check out particular types of work and employment settings and frees both the employer and clients from making a commitment without adequate information.

- Seize every opportunity to educate both employers and co-workers about learning disabilities. Share information from resources such as this one with them, as appropriate.⁶⁴

You may want to share the following strategies with employers who have had little or no experience in supervising employees with learning disabilities:

- Talk as you would to anyone else. If the employee can't understand you, the employee will explain what you can do to make yourself understood.
- Offer to help when it's appropriate, but don't insist. If persons with learning disabilities need your help, they will tell you what will be most helpful.
- Don't assume that errors persons with LD make are due to carelessness. Lateness, for example, may be caused by the disability. Discuss the problem with them.
- Don't interpret a lack of response as rudeness. Persons with learning disabilities may react unconventionally or may appear to ignore you. The person may have a processing problem that affects social skills.
- Recognize that persons with LD may appear to be staring at you or sitting or standing too close. They may be trying to read your lips or may be attempting to block out competing noise or they may not be aware of how close they are to you because of depth perception problems.
- Recognize that persons with learning disabilities may not maintain eye contact or may become easily distracted. Draw their attention back to the task at hand.
- If it takes the person extra time to learn a certain skill, this doesn't necessarily mean they will perform the task poorly. Processing difficulties interfere with learning but not with doing the job once it has been learned.
- Persons with LD may need help organizing thoughts and tasks. Large projects may need to be broken down into many steps.
- Be direct when giving instructions. Say what you mean. Don't hint, imply or use sarcasm.

- Help persons with LD learn the unwritten rules of the organization. Don't expect them to automatically pick them up. Explain the unwritten rules clearly.
- Be understanding of their problems, but be firm about limits you set.
- Be especially thorough in orientations. Go over every rule and make sure employees with learning disabilities understand the process of a successful workday.⁶⁵

You may also want to collaborate with employers to

- identify specific work clients might be responsible for
- identify impact of learning disability
- strategize ways to maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses
- secure appropriate job accommodations

Job accommodations

Worksite accommodations can mean the difference between success and lack of success at work for persons with learning disabilities. "Accommodation means making sure that workplace policies, procedures and environments don't negatively impact upon employees."⁶⁶ Reasonable accommodations that clients might request include the range of adjustments or adaptations that will render the workplace or job more suitable to the needs and abilities of workers with disabilities.

For persons with learning disabilities, accommodations may include

- flexible work assignments
- access to word processors, calculators and tape recorders
- voice recognition phones to permit dialing by voice
- automatic dialers for persons with sequencing problems
- timers to help recognize the time spent on various tasks
- scanners that scan printed text and read it out loud
- extended training periods
- distraction-free workplaces

- use of buddy systems with other employees
- written, demonstrated or taped instructions⁶⁷

Accommodations: A success story

An owner of a retail store wanted to promote an employee from a stock clerk to the position of cashier. However, the owner was concerned that the employee would not be able to perform the job due to a specific learning disability.

The position involved operating a cash register and a bar code scanner. Each item was marked with both the price and a bar code. Most of the products were scanned into the register. However, sometimes the scanner would not work and the bar code numbers then had to be entered into the cash register by hand. The employee had difficulty with numbers and often reversed numbers in a series.

The owner agreed to allow the employee to try using an index card with a hole just large enough to allow one digit of the bar code to be displayed at a time. The employee could place the hole over the first digit of the bar code and then slide it along the numbers, thereby allowing her to enter one digit from the bar code into the cash register at a time and reducing the chance of reversal.⁶⁸

Assistive technologies

"Assistive technology means any item, piece of equipment, product or system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized that directly assists, maintains, or improves functional capabilities of individuals with learning disabilities. The key to effective assistive technology is finding the right match between the problems, technological tool, and the implementation."⁶⁹

Individuals with learning disabilities often have difficulty with skills that others take for granted. Reading, listening, organizing information or writing skills may benefit from the use of assistive technology.⁷⁰ Devices may be high tech using sophisticated electronics or low tech, such as sticky notes, charts systems, calendars and checklists.⁷¹

Difficulties in handwriting and editing can be overcome by using a computer with a good word processor, including a spell checker, grammar and style checker. Personal assistance with editing or proofing or taking notes can also be useful. The visual appeal and speech ability of a computer program, combined with the adult typing or verbally giving responses, provides the multi-sensory dimension of learning that benefits adults with learning disabilities.

Technology can assist in other ways:

- Reading difficulties can be overcome with use of recorded instructions, lectures and books, as well as reader services and digital page scanners with speech ability to read back the scanned pages.
- Organizational difficulties can be overcome with electronic date books or day planners.
- Mathematical difficulties can be overcome with electronic calculators, graph paper or a sample list of steps to follow.

Disability Related Employment Supports

Disability Related Employment Supports (DRES) from the Government of Alberta may be available to eligible individuals with documented permanent or chronic disabilities. DRES is available in the form of supports or services to reduce, alleviate, or remove the barriers for education, training, job search and/or employment. Examples include assistive technologies installations or worksite modifications, sign language interpreters or specific disability-related software.⁷²

Employment supports

Every client is different and tailored strategies are most effective when they are fine-tuned to address the specific needs of the individual client as an employee.

Compensation for disabilities

The following is a list of difficulties and appropriate compensation strategies that clients may use:

- *Make careless mistakes.* Encourage clients to ask supervisors to review the steps of a job with them, and then watch them complete tasks several times to determine the reason for carelessness and to examine alternatives. For example, if carelessness appears due to a cluttered work surface, taking time to organize materials may help.
- *Do not seem to listen.* Encourage clients to write down, or ask to have written down, important information in the simplest possible form.
- *Make frequent errors.* Encourage clients to ask supervisors to monitor their work to determine the consistency of error types. Pacing of work might be different for clients with learning disabilities than for others. Clients might ask that a partner be assigned to them to help determine the error's origin. Work should only be undertaken on one area at a time.
- *Have difficulty following written directions.* Encourage clients to ask that directions be recorded and that diagrams be drawn to illustrate directions. Clients can also develop a code or symbol system to deal with written information.
- *Have difficulty generalizing or transferring knowledge.* Encourage clients to review the original information format or process to determine similarities and to identify what old information is applicable to the new situation. Clients could ask a supervisor to watch them practise the new process, reinforcing previously learned or acquired skills or information.
- *Have time-management difficulties on the job.* Encourage clients to ask to be paired with a partner to reinforce the schedule and work sequence. They could also ask that the time sequence of the task or schedule be illustrated or set out in a flow chart.

- *Have short-term memory problems.* Suggest clients keep detailed notes that are written or recorded and clearly labelled with topic, persons involved and date.
- *Have hand/eye co-ordination problems.* Suggest that clients find time to practise skills when they are not under pressure and have a mentor or supervisor check their performance to ensure that they are practising correctly.
- *Have visual perception problems.* Encourage clients to have a place for everything and to put everything in the proper place at all times.
- *Have a short attention span.* Suggest they rotate several projects through the course of one work day.⁷³

Client's self-assessment of employment skills

This checklist may be helpful to review with clients. If appropriate, make a copy for the client.

- ___ Look neat and clean. Dress simply, the way others dress for the same job.
- ___ Be on time, both arriving and leaving. Take only the time you are given for breaks.
- ___ If you can't go to work, call. Your boss needs to know if you can't be there so that he or she can have someone else do your work that day.
- ___ Do the work that has to be done. Every job includes tasks that are not particularly fun.
- ___ Be prepared to spend extra time learning the job. If you are slower, be willing to take extra time to finish your share of the work.
- ___ Ask for help when needed. Even though other employees and supervisors may act impatient, asking for help is better than making errors.
- ___ On the other hand, don't ask for help when not needed.
- ___ Take advantage of the honeymoon period—the first few days on the job when everyone expects you to ask questions. Some people like helping others. Try to find these people and ask them to watch you do the job correctly.

Repeat the information they give you. Say, "Please listen to me tell you so I can be sure I understand." Don't let them interrupt you and tell you what to do. Be sure they are listening to you.

- ___ Don't use a disability as an excuse for not trying to do your best, not getting along with others, not trying to control your behaviour or refusing responsibilities that you can handle.
- ___ Offer to do tasks that you can handle but that are unpopular. You'll feel more comfortable asking others for help with jobs you have trouble with.
- ___ Develop ways of remembering the important things. Write them down. Say them aloud when you are alone. Ask your friends to test you.
- ___ When you make mistakes, apologize and correct them immediately.
- ___ Try hard and make the effort. Pay attention. Look everyone in the eye. Look at your work as you do it. Don't let your eyes or mind wander. Walk purposefully from place to place.
- ___ Discuss your learning disability with those who need to know about it, ensuring you also discuss the strategies you use to address the difficulties it causes.
- ___ Offer general information about learning disabilities to those who are interested.⁷⁴

In Conclusion

Finding success stories

Why not develop a roster of successfully employed persons with learning disabilities? These people will be valuable resources as:

- role models for other clients with learning disabilities
- sources of ideas for career options for other clients with learning disabilities
- success stories for employers who are apprehensive about hiring persons with learning disabilities.⁷⁵

The number of success stories about persons with learning disabilities continues to grow. Successful persons with learning disabilities acknowledge and compensate for their disabilities. They take control of their own lives and are frequently very creative, particularly in developing compensatory strategies. They are able to reframe their experience of having a learning disability into a more positive experience. They extend this control and positive attitude into work environments where they are valued and make important contributions.

Counsellors have a role to play in helping clients with learning disabilities achieve success. Supporting clients to take control, encouraging them to tap into their own creativity to overcome challenges and helping them access available supports will be important elements in the career-building process.

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