

Promoting Partnerships and Employment for People with Disabilities

Virginia Board for People with Disabilities and Virginia Commonwealth University,
Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention

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Success Stories

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Renee

Renee Hawkins, age 55, has overcome significant obstacles to achieve success in her work. She was born with a deformity in her right leg that makes it shorter than her left leg. Her palate is short which causes a speech impediment, and she was diagnosed with hearing loss in both ears at age 4. The difference in the length of her legs has affected her gait and posture, which has resulted in the onset of three different types of arthritis. Her vocational goals have centered on clerical and fiscal positions, the longest term of employment being with the Commonwealth of Virginia, which she enjoyed and would like to obtain again. Ms. Hawkins is happily married, a newlywed at age 53, and draws much support from her husband, her friends and her church.

The greatest challenges at work have come from inaccurate impressions associated with her limp and communication issues related to her hearing loss. She explains her limp and speech combined to give an impression of insecurity, which was exacerbated by her hearing loss. It interfered with normal, rapid conversation and resulted in misunderstandings with coworkers and supervisors. Potential employers tended to focus on her disabilities rather than her abilities. Effective workplace communication was a constant effort, people often hung up on her, and telephone messages she left for others were frequently not understood. She struggled with low self-esteem, confidence, and the need to repeat herself often. Working in a team environment was unnecessarily frustrating and counter-productive, and terminations punctuated her attempts to be financially independent. Even succeeding in academic environments was difficult when, as the instructor explained, they were not going to slow the pace of the class because of her hearing. With time, improved self-advocacy skills, experience and support, however, she learned that she needed to face the person with whom she was communicating, that oral conversations on the telephone must be kept to a minimum, and that with patience she can maintain a positive attitude and engage in productive workplace communications.

Ms. Hawkins' work history includes 18 years with the Commonwealth of Virginia, and 10 years as a Data Entry Operator. In an effort to enter a more lucrative field, Ms. Hawkins studied for a position as a Health Reference Coding Technician but was unable to obtain employment. She participated in a supported employment program at the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) and worked with a job coach, but found that

while employers routinely wanted to hire candidates with experience none were willing to provide that experience. She eventually went back to data entry.

The experience she had with Caliper in obtaining her current long-term assignment with the Commonwealth has been “wonderful”. Ms. Hawkins interviewed, followed up as required, and was assigned a position as a Data Entry Operator in an Auditing Department. The position initially involved telephone responsibilities, but an accommodation was made that allowed Ms. Hawkins to focus instead on data entry, a modification that has been successful and would now, according to her supervisor, be replicated with any other employees in that position. The initial contract lasted for 6 months and was recently renewed for another year. Ms. Hawkins’ goal is to earn the distinction required to obtain permanent, direct employment with the Commonwealth and access to associated benefits. She knows she is in a different place in her life now, both in her work life and her private life, and she thanks God for the assistance in getting there.

Ms. Hawkins’ supervisor confirms that Ms. Hawkins has done a great job, that she is conscientious, responsible, proactive regarding scheduling issues, and shows initiative in asking for work or volunteering to help others when she is caught up, which happens more frequently now that Ms. Hawkins is in the position. The obstacles in communication required a lengthier training period, but the long-term benefits of having a dedicated and productive employee more than makes up for that initial investment. Her supervisor indicated that the attitude is critical. Having a good attitude makes dealing with any other issues possible, and Ms. Hawkins has demonstrated that in spite of the obstacles she overcomes on a daily basis, she has a winning attitude.

