

University Degree Key to Success for Youth with Disabilities

by Maria Barile, Catherine Fichten,
Mary Jorgensen et Mai Nhu Nguyen
From Adaptech Research Network



Finding work after graduation is a major concern for all college and university students. But what is the situation for students with physical disabilities, such as wheelchair users? This is an important question since within the community of persons with disabilities, as well as in the community at large, there is “popular buzz” that previous generations experienced high levels of unemployment.

Do the graduates with physical disabilities of today find employment after graduation? This is the key question explored by the Adaptech Research Network in a recent study that focused on the experiences of two groups of respondents who identified themselves as having some type of physical disability (e.g., used a cane or crutch,

wheelchair, scooter): recent college and university graduates (individuals who completed their program of study in the last two years), and premature leavers (individuals who left their program of study before graduating).

Among the general community at large and within the community of persons with disabilities, there is a common belief that “physical disability” impedes success in finding desired employment. To some extent, this was true in the 1980s, when the built environment and the lack of adaptive technologies often made it difficult for people to access jobs. There were many instances where people would be invited to come in for interviews, only to find that there were three steps on the inside or outside of the building. In other cases, individuals would be told that their disability would be a danger for other employees, for example “a fire risk.” Or they would be refused an interview based on the interviewer’s assumption that they could not perform a specific task due to, for example, the person having the use of only one hand. Is this still true 30 years later?

Among the 33 individuals with physical disabilities who participated in our study, 17 were female and 16 were male. Their average age was 26.

- Four individuals were “not in the labour force” - these are persons who, for a variety of reasons, were neither employed nor looking for work at the time when they responded to our questionnaire.
- Among the remaining 29 respondents (i.e., those who are “in the labour force”), the largest number (76%: 22 of the 29 participants) were employed. Of these, 14 were working full time, six were working part time, and two had accepted jobs but had not



yet started working.

- Seven were unemployed (24%), but interested in working and looking for a job.

Among the 20 individuals who had already started working, 14 were employed in fields "very closely" related to their program of study. Four individuals said their current job was "partially related" to their program. Only two respondents said their job was "unrelated" to their studies.

Job satisfaction is important for all employees, including individuals with physical disabilities.

We were pleased to find that in our study, 40% were "very satisfied" and 45% were "satisfied" with their job. Only 3% were "dissatisfied," and nobody was "very dissatisfied."

Although the number of respondents in our study was small, the results show that employment opportunities for recent college and university graduates with disabilities are much better today than the often quoted "70% unemployment" reported for times past. Change that to "over 70% employment"!



Dear members,

It is with much sadness that we learned about the passing of Maria Barile on July 24. Since the very beginning, Maria was involved in the creation and development of an independent living center in Montreal. Throughout the years, she remained very active as a member and ally. She was always available to contribute to IL-M by creating and leading workshops on topics such as independent living, self-esteem and health. Moreover, she worked for IL-M as a consultant to advise us on many issues such as accessibility and adapted communications.

Empowerment was innate in her. For years, she worked unwaveringly to promote the full participation of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society, without exception. She devoted herself to many causes alongside us and the many organizations she collaborated with. For instance, she advocated for the employment of persons with disabilities in the Montreal and pan Canadian disability community.

She was a pillar in the IL-M community. We will miss her greatly.

We extend our condolences and deepest sympathy to her family and friends.