

# Guest Blog: Empowered by Work

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Before college, I was set on becoming a librarian. During college, completing my coursework successfully took all of my time and energy. I did not think any more about my career plans until I spent a semester as an intern at my local public library during my senior year. I enjoyed my internship, but I could only do parts of the job description. I also job shadowed at my university library's technical services department. It was in the basement and required a master's degree, and I decided I wasn't that interested in library science after all.

One of the biggest lessons you can take from my experience is that career exploration should not wait until college is almost over. In fact, the earlier people can start thinking about employment possibilities, the better. You can write down things you are interested in and begin exploring. Personally, I was so nervous about the future that I avoided it for as long as possible. More thoughtful career exploration would have paid off and been less stressful.

The internet is a good place to begin researching careers and yourself. Two free websites are <https://www.onetonline.org> and <https://www.careeronestop.org>. They both can help you explore occupations, match your skills, and match your interests. For those with disabilities, it is important to consider how your disability shapes your reality. My reality is that working from home is best. It allows me to fit my personal care needs, including therapies, around my work. I don't need to get rides to and from work. My workspace has evolved over the years into three stations: computer/printer, reading, and projects. I enjoy my independence and feel comfortable enough to do my best work.

As you evaluate your own circumstances, here are some important questions to ask. Which limitations could you overcome with enough desire and practice, and which limitations are simply facts of life? How and where can you best receive the support you need? Are you willing or able to relocate? How do you feel about working from home? There are no right or wrong answers.

I am currently employed writing blog posts, a job I got through networking. A friend contacted me saying that Utah State University was looking to hire someone to write blog posts about the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Networking is a major way to connect job seekers with employers. Your networking connections know you and your abilities and can let you know about an opportunity, often before a job is posted. It's been three years and I am still enjoying writing blog posts for USU.

There is great value in unpaid volunteer work. My own experiences doing volunteer work have helped me to gain confidence and explore my capabilities. I started volunteering through my church years before I got a paying job. I have been the secretary of the girls youth group, a Sunday School teacher, the electronic record-keeper for a nativity festival, and a church communication specialist. I have contributed in meaningful ways to the congregation and have discovered myself in the process.

Volunteer work and paid employment can both bring a great sense of accomplishment. It is empowering to contribute positively to the lives of others. Work provides opportunities to overcome challenges. Learning new things expands your mind. Meeting new people expands your social circle. My work shifts my focus away from myself and my problems, which is healthier for me mentally and emotionally. I hope more people with disabilities can feel empowered to make the world a better place through meaningful work.