

## Become A Champion for Employment! Guiding People with Brain Injuries Towards Work

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***A Resource for Supporting Individuals with a Brain Injury  
Continue or Pursue Work***

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**Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center-TBI-2**

### Overview

Work provides us with more than just a source of income. We derive a sense of pride and purpose, independence, social support, and personal identity from being employed. All these factors contribute to our overall emotional and physical health. Helping individuals with brain injury become successfully employed can change many aspects of a person’s life.

Work provides all of us with:			
A Sense of Pride and Purpose	Independence	Money	New Friends

### Brain Injury

A brain injury is an internal or external event that affects how the brain works. Temporary or long-term cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges caused by brain injury can impact a person’s ability to think, learn, remember, move, act, and feel. Each brain injury is as unique as the person who sustains the injury and may impact their ability to find and maintain work. Nearly 2.9 million people sustain a new traumatic brain injury (TBI) each year<sup>i</sup>, and an estimated 13.5 million individuals live with challenges due to TBI in the United States. The need is even greater when factoring in those who have experienced other types of injury to the brain such as oxygen deprivation, aneurysm, disease, etc. Brain injury is also often “hidden;” challenges go unseen, discounted, or forgotten, which can impact job performance. Sometimes a person does not even know they have had a brain injury because it was never identified or was misdiagnosed, but the challenges still exist.

## **Brain Injury and Employment**

Success with work depends on strong preparation and a good match of skills and abilities with a position. As a source of support for a person with a brain injury, you can provide encouragement for what is possible and, most importantly, provide linkages to professionals who can support the journey of uncovering where interests, abilities, and skills align with employment opportunities. There are a variety of employment service providers who can help individuals work on strategies to prepare for work, find a job, and stay employed. In some cases, it may even be possible for someone to return to a former job, with or without support.

## **How to Engage in an Employment Conversation**

A person living with a brain injury may believe the following:

1. If I go to work, I will lose all my benefits.
2. I can't do the kind of work I did before my injury, so I'm unemployable.
3. My brain injury challenges keep me from going to work.

By asking individuals if they have considered employment and assuring them that other people with brain injuries have found successful and meaningful work, you may inspire someone to consider and start exploring options. Here are examples of conversation starters to use to engage someone who has experienced a brain injury in a conversation about employment.

### **Conversations Starters: Encouraging People with Brain Injury to Pursue or Return to Employment**

- “There are specialists to help you look at the impact of work on your benefits and make a detailed plan. They are called Benefits Counselors or Community Work Incentives Coordinators (CWICs), and I can help you get connected. You can learn how to decrease your need for assistance as well as options for maintaining health insurance, even if your cash benefits go away.”
- “If you can't do the kind of work you used to do, you may qualify for assistance with retraining. Many people have found this type of assistance after connecting with their local vocational rehabilitation office. Would you like to check out that resource?”
- “People in the same situation as you have found that accommodations on the job help them manage brain injury difficulties or challenges. Let me show you a great on-line resource to learn more at the [Job Accommodation Network](#).”



## Getting Started

There are different ways for someone considering work to get professional and often no-cost employment support, but it can feel overwhelming to know the right place to start. Consider providing this guidance to people living with brain injury:

- Many people with brain injuries find that a great place to start is their local vocational rehabilitation office in order to benefit from a broad range of services. Connect by checking here: [State VR Directory](#).
- Individuals receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) may want to try working with an [Employment Network](#) in their area. These networks help people with SSDI and SSI use their “Ticket to Work” career development program and may be a good fit if high-cost services such as education or equipment are not needed to engage in work.
- People receiving specialized support through a state Medicaid waiver program can be encouraged to find out if employment assistance is available within their benefit options.
- A [local workforce center](#) may be a good resource for individuals who are fairly independent and don’t need a lot of disability-related support.
- A growing number of [Centers for Independent Living \(CILs\)](#) offer employment assistance and/or information/referral.
- If an individual feels they need advocacy or support, they can contact their local [Protection and Advocacy or Client Assistance Program](#).

## Service Innovations

Getting employment support is not one-size-fits-all. There are many tailored approaches to help individuals living with a brain injury participate in work. Consider these:

### *Customized and Supported Employment*

People living with a brain injury, especially if the injury results in significant challenges, may be able to receive extra help as they begin to work through options called “supported employment” or “customized employment (CE).” An employment provider can review the approaches and share available, person-centered methods for CE career exploration such as Discovery.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Discovery is the foundation for securing customized employment. It is a qualitative process aimed to better understand job seekers by understanding their strengths (potential contributions to employers), their needs (the features that need to be in place for success), and their interests (providing a direction to the type of work that the individual wants to do). For more information on Discovery and tools and resources to support the implementation of Discovery,



## ***Self-Employment***

Some people find they can manage their brain injury symptoms by owning and operating their own small business, particularly when they have a marketable skill or talent. Vocational rehabilitation programs may be able to support this path.

## ***Rapid Job Retention***

Sometimes returning to the same or a similar job held prior to a brain injury is possible with “rapid job retention” support. In this approach, a coach or consultant advises an employer on strategies for modifying the job or accommodating an employee with a brain injury.

## ***Work Experiences***

There are options to “practice” work through a temporary or part-time job. Volunteering or trying what is called a “work experience” before moving into paid employment can be a confidence builder and a way to refresh skills after a brain injury.

## ***Accommodations/Assistive Technology***

Equipment, smartphone applications, or other accommodations can help individuals living with brain injury manage symptoms or challenges. Check out the many accommodation options at the [Job Accommodation Network](#).

## **Tips & Strategies**

Here are a few examples for assisting with challenges related to brain injury:

### ***Physical Strategies***

*People with brain injury may experience mobility challenges, fatigue, headaches or sensitivity to lights or noise.*

- Allow additional time to get from place to place.
- Learn, interview, or work in a quiet environment with indirect or incandescent lighting.
- Select a job based on a schedule that allows for routine breaks or the best time of day for peak energy.

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please check out the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy's [webpage on Customized Employment](#).

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## **Attention Strategies**

*Cognitive challenges affect a person's ability to focus, stay on task, or pay attention.*

- Provide information in concise chunks.
- Work on one task at a time.
- Involve the person in planning and implementation.
- Recheck from time to time to make sure you have the person's attention and that they are still tracking what is being provided. Ask them to restate what has been said.
- Make sure you do not have your back turned so that you are easy to understand.
- During the COVID-19 public health emergency, consider the impact of your mask on your speaking volume and others' ability to focus.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Redirect someone if they veer off-topic verbally or with other cues.
- Look for work that involves an environment as free of distractions as possible.

## **Processing Speed and Memory Strategies**

*It may take longer for someone to be able to digest new information, or transfer old information, into a new environment. It may also take a person longer to read or write down information or convey understanding.*

- Allow additional time for verbal or written communication.
- Help with writing things down.
- Share information in advance and in a variety of formats.
- Encourage recording information, either written or audio, to recall later.
- Be concrete but positive and avoid subtle social cues or feedback.
- Work with short-term as well-as long-term planning to accomplish more involved tasks.

## **Behavioral Strategies**

*Brain injury can result in a person being less aware or less sensitive to the impact of their behavior on other people. They might also be less tactful in providing feedback or act on impulses that they have instead of avoiding them. Their emotional triggers might also be activated more quickly as well.*

- Look for jobs that are best suited for a person's reactions and triggers.



- Provide clear expectations for appropriate work behavior and give feedback when this needs redirection.
- Encourage frequent breaks and help a person recognize and avoid what “pushes their buttons.”

## **Weblink Directory**

- [Vocational Rehabilitation Programs](#)
- [Ticket to Work – Employment Networks](#)
- [Workforce Centers](#)
- [Centers for Independent Living](#)
- [Protection & Advocacy, Client Assistance Programs](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network](#)

### **Want to Learn More?**

Look for an upcoming online course on brain injury and employment through the Disability Employment TA Center!

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<sup>i</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). Surveillance Report of Traumatic Brain Injury -related Hospitalizations and Deaths by Age Group, Sex, and Mechanism of Injury—United States, 2016 and 2017. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

