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## **Rob's Long but Successful Road to Employment**

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(BBB Autism; printable article #55)

Sometimes our dreams take a lot of work and struggle for them to become a reality. However, most believe that once they reached their dream that it was worth the struggle. Such is the case for Rob Hahn and his parents of Peru, Indiana. Rob graduated from Maconaquah High School in 1994. His parents had always thought that Rob would work in the community, despite his disability of autism. The planning for Rob's future started in high school where Rob began his career exploration by sampling a number of jobs within the school and in the community.

Rob's first job outside of the school was at the Miami County Pet Clinic. The second job that Rob was introduced to was at the Pizza Quik. Rob performed a variety of tasks at this job. He helped to make the submarine sandwiches and he also recategorized videos when they were returned. What everyone learned quickly with the Pizza Quik job was that Rob enjoyed making money. Pizza Quik was Rob's first paid position. He looked forward to pay day. Other things that were learned about Rob is that he is a very hard worker.

Rob's final job while still in high school was at Duke's Memorial Hospital. The school tried to get Rob a clerical position. They believed that it was possible that Rob could get bored in other positions that might not challenge him mentally. Rob wound up volunteering for the hospital through his graduation from high school and a few years after as well. This was an unpaid position, which didn't fulfill Rob's dreams. His parents still wanted to strive to help Rob find a job that he would enjoy and that would also allow him to earn an income. Money wasn't only important to Rob's parents. As mentioned previously in this article, financial reward was very important to Rob as well. This became clear during the interview when Rob was asked what was the best part of working at his current job; he replied, "Getting paid every Friday!"

Rob and his parents entered into a relationship with Vocational Rehabilitation and the local supported employment agency in order to help Rob find a job. This job search began August of 1994 and didn't really end until September of 1998. The first strategy that Rob's parents, Rob, Melinda McCarthy (employment consultant), and Linda Meister-Crowder (VR counselor) developed was to explore the possibility of Duke's Memorial Hospital paying Rob for the job that he was already doing as a volunteer. This was tried countless times, but the hospital never entered into such an arrangement. Finally, it became clear that in order to assist Rob in finding a paid position in the community, the search would have to go outside the hospital. Peru is a small town in northern Indiana. Its population is 13,000. In general, the availability of jobs is low. In addition, employment for Rob needed to be challenging, fun, and reasonable to get to with the transportation that was available to Rob. Rob lives out in the country with his parents. So, carpooling with his parents was one of the few options available to him. Rob's father works in town for the school district and his mother works 30 miles north in another town. The employment consultant realized that before she could even pursue a job she needed to check with Rob's parents and the one other transportation service in the county to see if transportation could be naturally supported.

Melinda McCarthy (employment consultant) continued to pound the pavement on a regular basis. One day Melinda and Rob got a break. Melinda had been approaching on particular employer for two years. This business was fairly new to Peru. Even though Erik, the owner of Action Gear, met with Melinda and had given her a tour of the company, he never said yes to employing someone with a disability, but he also never said no. Melinda, being patient and wise, continued her contact with the employer. She stated that she didn't want to pester him. However, she wondered if it was just a matter of developing the relationship and gaining the employer's trust. Occasionally she would call and see how business was going. After a year and a half, Erik began to ask questions about the program. He began to ask if there was an individual who could count and do other tasks that are required for one of the positions at his organization. Once Melinda began to gain a detailed understanding of the employer's needs as well as the work environment, she introduced Erik to Rob. I asked Melinda if she had always thought of Rob for this position. She admitted no. She said that she was originally looking at this position for a woman who she was supporting. At the time, she didn't realize that the Action Gear was a fairly small organization and that it was a very personable environment. These were two priorities that she kept in mind



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when searching for a job for Rob due to his need for support on the job. Therefore, once she had observed the environment she realized that it was suited much better to Rob than the other individual.

Rob has been working at Action Gear since September of 1998. Action Gear does embroidery and screen-printing. They do extensive business with various sports teams and for sporting events around the country. For example, they worked on sweatshirts that stated that the Denver Broncos had won the Super Bowl and that they were the Champs! When Erik was asked what it is like to supervise Rob, he replied, "We wish all our employees had attitudes like Rob's! He's a great worker!!"

Over time, everyone has come to realize that Rob's employment at Action Gear provides a number of important things. It provided him with the opportunity to be employed in the community, which helps him to be a contributing member of his community. It also offers Rob the opportunity and challenge to join the communication and social loop. His desire and involvement in social situations is increasing since he has begun working. Rob's speech is limited, but Rob's parents feel that Rob has become more communicative now that he is working in the community. He needs to communicate to do his job and, more important, he wants to interact with his co-workers to be known, to get to know others, and to take part in the work culture at Action Gear. He has become part of the social group and is seen as someone who belongs.

The following people were asked, "What would you like to tell other people who find themselves supporting people with autism or what were the lessons that you learned from knowing Rob and being involved with his employment?" Following are the responses that were offered:

"Given the opportunity, people with significant disabilities can be employed just like any other person."

Linda Meister-Crowder  
Vocational Rehabilitation

"When job developing, be open to all the options. Be extremely persistent when contacting businesses."

Melinda McCarthy  
Employment Consultant

"Work and make friends!!"

Rob Hahn

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