

Overcoming Disabilities and Mental Health Challenges to Find Work



BRIGHT IDEAS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

SYNOPSIS

Noticing a gap in the employment market for youth with disabilities and mental health challenges, CanAssist created the TeenWork program. TeenWork assists individuals aged 15-19 who are enrolled in high school to find meaningful employment through opportunities and relationships with local businesses.

LOCATION

Capital Region

POPULATION

383,360

ECONOMIC BASE

Tourism, technology, government, education

INNOVATORS

TeenWork through CanAssist at the University of Victoria

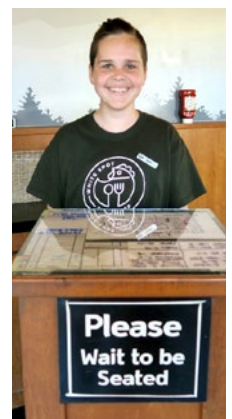


THE ORGANIZATION

CanAssist is an organization within the University of Victoria that supports persons with disabilities so that all people are given the opportunity to reach their full potential. CanAssist was founded in 1999 to develop assistive technologies that increase users' independence and quality of life.

The organization draws on the inventive and technological capabilities of the university community, using faculty and students in co-op and graduate placements to respond to requests from individuals throughout British Columbia.

TeenWork is a program of CanAssist that provides the training and support needed for high school students with disabilities and mental health challenges to enter paid employment with local businesses. The students gain valuable mentorship and workplace skills while the employers fill a gap in business needs.



THE CHALLENGE

In 2009, CanAssist staff who worked with youth clients saw that disabilities and mental health challenges posed barriers in finding and keeping employment. Having little to no prior work experience, youth with disabilities were looking for jobs without the necessary supports in place to find employment.

Even when they found jobs, they often faced challenges of fitting in and adapting to a workplace. CanAssist saw an opportunity to

bridge the gap by working both with youth and local employers, using assistive technology where needed but focusing on job skills and coaching to create successful employment matches.



For more information, visit gov.bc.ca/economicdevelopment





THE STRATEGY

TeenWork has been operating since 2009 with support from local employers and [partners](#).

Youth participants begin in the Discovery Process. Job coaches encourage each participant to identify their strengths and challenges and what jobs they like. This allows the coach to pinpoint specific jobs available and reach “real work for real pay” for the participant.

Next, participants enter the Development Stage and get help writing resumes and cover letters, preparing for interviews, learning workplace etiquette and applying for jobs.

Businesses are encouraged to reach out to TeenWork to hire youth, and the TeenWork coordinator also contacts local businesses to explore employment opportunities. Coaches work with willing employers to co-create TeenWork opportunities that satisfy business needs while playing to each participant’s strengths. Once a position is confirmed, a job coach will support the match by helping the youth in

learning job duties and understanding the employer’s expectations.

Job coaches work with participants to become good employees by planning transportation to/from workplaces and accompanying them to work shifts. Employers are able to contact job coaches to help smooth out any hiccups, increasing the likelihood that the match will be a positive experience on both sides.

On site, job coaches help participants understand and achieve workplace expectations like behaviour, work ethic and appearance. Coaches tailor visits to each individual’s needs, creating job aids and facilitating connections with colleagues for mentorship. Once the participant feels confident in their role, the coach decreases on-site visits to allow for further growth and independence.

Maintaining working connections with employers is key. TeenWork staff strive for effective communication with employers and have regular check-ins to ensure the partnership is working for both the youth and the employer.

SUCCESSES

EMPLOYMENT

- TeenWork has helped more than 76 participants locate part-time employment during their high school years.
- 95.7% of TeenWork participants have obtained successful paid work at some point during their time with the TeenWork program.
- Several participants have remained in their roles and entered full-time work positions after graduation.
- Businesses who take part in the TeenWork program have noticed an increase in retention for entry-level positions.

EXPANSION

- The TeenWork program has grown in the ten years of its operation. The team is comprised of seven coaches and one manager in Victoria.
- In 2018, TeenWork expanded and is now available in the Lower Mainland in partnership with CBI Consultants, with funding from the Government of Canada’s Skills Link program.
- CanAssist has also launched a group-based version of TeenWork which follows the same pathway through discovery and development in a group setting, followed by individual employment supports.
- Stories of [TeenWork participants](#) and [feedback](#) from youth, parents, support providers and employers speak to the effectiveness of the program.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Never underestimate** the abilities of youth with disabilities or mental health challenges to interact and participate in society through employment. Once the youth find employment they often **exceed the expectations** and work on the same level or even higher than their peers.

- Youth have developed a great **sense of community** with job coaches, employers and co-workers. Many employers have confirmed that employing participants from TeenWork has increased their overall **team cohesion**.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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