

The New Path to Employment:

Navigating Rocky Economic Times to Find Success in the Working World

By Brian Hubler and Erika Ebsworth-Gould



Introducing Amy

"Did you clock in, honey?"

"Yeah, I did, Dad."

And with that, 25-year-old Amy Grunzinger rolls up her sleeves, pulls on plastic gloves and begins her shift at Schnucks, a St. Louis-area grocery store. She's got a busy four hours ahead in the store's café area. She immediately begins to wipe down tables. She will also keep the floor swept, the soda machine stocked, and the customers smiling.

"I like the people I work with," Amy says with a grin. "I like Lori, my boss. I like the customers."

Amy came to work at Schnucks two and a half years ago, but the process was far more complicated and involved than simply filling out an application and providing references. Amy has Down syndrome. Some typical job tasks are difficult, others are impossible for her to complete. It is easy for her to be distracted and, at times, tough to give Amy direction. Despite the challenges, her co-workers say Amy is a valued and vital part of their team. Amy's successful path to employment was paved with the combined efforts of her family, professional support, and a corporation willing to take a chance.

This is their remarkable story, one shared by thousands of other families across the country.

Making the Right Connection

Amy's successes are quite inspirational, but far from unique. According to the 2008 National Report on Employment Services and Outcomes, in states' Fiscal Year 2007, an estimated 115,293 people were supported by a developmental disability program while working in a competitive job. According to the Department of Labor's latest research, the percentage of people with disabilities in the workforce is 22.8%. A huge amount of work goes into preparing for the job, and people are getting hired, but what about retention rates?

"In my 20 plus years of providing

employment services and supports, the success lies in the job match," says Darla Wilkerson, Director of Employment and Training for the Missouri Department of Mental Health. "The better the match between the job candidate and the business, the more likely people are to stay on the job. People tend to be more motivated when in a job they like. That really isn't any different than people without disabilities, is it?"

The Transition to Work

Amy Grunzinger comes from a large and unforgettable family. They have lived in the same community for years; everyone knows the Grunzingers. Amy is one of 17 children.

Her father Tom describes his eight sons and nine daughters as a close-knit bunch. He's retired now, and often wonders about Amy's future. He readily admits he worries about her often.

"I probably over-protect her," Tom Grunzinger says. "But the good thing is, with all of her siblings, when I'm gone she'll have plenty of support."

The foundation for Amy's career path started taking shape when she was still attending school in suburban St. Louis. Amy was enrolled in the Special School District of St. Louis County, which provides education to students with disabilities. When she was 16, she started a summer work program. Amy got real-life job experiences and the support of a job coach. This began Amy's transition from school to competitive employment.

Amy graduated from the Special School District when she was 21. She didn't immediately go to work, choosing to stay home with her family instead. Things drastically changed when Amy's mother Nancy passed away in July 2006.

"Everyone had started asking, 'Well, is Amy going to work?' And I said 'No, she doesn't have to.' But then family members mentioned it would be good for her to get out," said Tom. "So they kind of coaxed me to contact the St. Louis Arc."

The St. Louis Arc is a non-profit organization which supports people with developmental disabilities and their families. The agency works hand in hand with Missouri's Vocational Rehabilitation program to place people in competitive employment. Both agencies worked together to find Amy her job. She received an initial assessment from the St. Louis Arc to gauge her likes, dislikes, and skill set. When a position at Schnucks became a viable option for Amy, she was matched up with Arc job coach Susan Sanders.

In the beginning, Sanders provided Amy 100% support for every shift and stayed in constant communication with Amy's supervisor, Schnucks Customer Service Manager Lori Markus. Immediately, Markus and Sanders focused on job duties that would appeal to Amy and her strengths.



Amy Grunzinger, above at work and with her father Tom, utilized the services offered at the St. Louis Arc to find employment at Schnucks, a St. Louis-area grocery store.

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"I tried to put some thought into what I thought she could do," Markus says. "We have our café, which is extremely busy from 11a.m. to 1:30p.m. every day, and it was really hard for our checkers to keep up with the tables. So we thought keeping the area clean would be a great job for Amy. She does a really good job. We're happy with her," Markus continues.

"Amy required support with remembering some things, such as wiping down a table she had missed or restocking the soda fountain," says Sanders. "As she continued to become more familiar with her job, she needed less direct support and was able to work independently. Now she does great," adds Sanders.

However, there have been bumps in the road in the two and a half years Amy's worked as a courtesy clerk. Misunderstandings can arise. Mistakes can and do happen. That's when Amy's job coach Susan steps back in to help.

"When we decided to hire Amy, Susan originally came in and showed Amy what her job duties were going to be, kind of what we were looking for," Markus explains. "Sometimes Amy can get kind of distracted and Susan can help me reel her in a little bit, keep her focused."

Small incidents have happened, like when Amy got a bit overzealous and started sweeping the customers' feet along with the floor, or when she overstuffing the napkin dispenser. Clocking in and out can be confusing. In those instances, Markus says it is important to have patience and a good sense of humor.

"You're going to have little things that come up," adds Markus. "We have expectations for all our employees and Amy is no different. But Susan really helps keep Amy focused on what she's supposed to do."

Moving Forward

Darla Wilkerson says on a national level, there's a lot of emphasis being placed on increased expectations for people with disabilities when it comes to employment. Wilkerson considers this shift in thinking a welcome change.

"Many state agencies are adopting what's called 'employment first' policies and practices. Employment first means that employment is the first-day service option offered to individuals in services prior to any other day services being offered. In our society, if you are of working age you are expected to work. That shouldn't be any different for individuals with disabilities," says Wilkerson.

And while the economic downturn and job cuts are concerns for everyone, Wilkerson cautions against using the rough economic climate as an excuse for failure.

"We need to be even more creative, promoting people's abilities and assisting them to market their skills to employers and also use networking as our number one job search strategy," Wilkerson says. "We need to skill up our staffs, put more emphasis on training and education for the employment personnel who are expected to assist candidates with job hunting if we want employment outcomes."

Wilkerson says sooner rather than later is the best time for a can-

“And right now with our economic woes, it’s like a little piece of sunshine. They come in, say hi to Amy, and it makes you realize taking a moment to be kind, it can help us all every single day.”

didate’s family to start thinking about and preparing for future employment. Amy Grunzinger got her first experience with the working world in school as a teenager and Wilkerson says that is the logical place for parents to begin exploring options for their children.

“Seek out assistance from the special education department. They should be able to help you get connected to additional resources. Expect the best and demand equal. I would encourage parents to start as early as they can talking about expectations for work, college, living independently and moving towards a quality of life that makes sense for them,” Wilkerson recommends.

Opening the Door

As it turns out, Amy Grunzinger’s job might have opened the door for more chances at an independent life. Her father, ever-protective, insists on taking her to work and picking her up every day, but Amy’s family and support staff are talking about exploring other options for her independence.

“There’s been discussion about her possibly getting an apartment or something like that. That’s up to her...if she wants to,” he says.

Either way, Amy’s job has affected not only her, but her co-workers and customers as well. Lori Markus says the risks have been well worth the rewards.

“When they see Amy, our customers know that we have compassion as a corporation and as an employer,” Markus adds. “And right now with our economic woes, it’s like a little piece of sunshine. They come in, say hi to Amy, and it makes you realize taking a moment to be kind, it can help us all every single day.”

“She’s part of the team, she’s part of the group,” adds job coach Susan Sanders. “She’s completely accepted as a co-worker and that’s so great to see. We are making independence and a productive life for individuals possible and it’s just amazing.” •

Erika Ebsworth-Gould is the Director of Communications and PR for the St. Louis Arc. She’s an award-winning journalist who joined the agency in September of 2008.

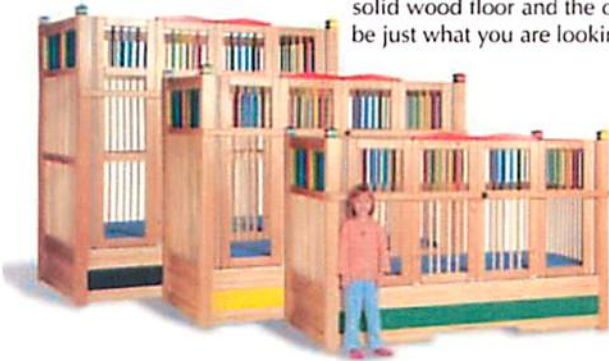
Brian Hubler is the Director of Employment and Transition Services for the St. Louis Arc. He’s got nearly a decade of experience in the field of supported employment and has been with the Arc since January of 2008.

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