

EDUCATION

EMPOWERMENT

EMPLOYMENT

# MEAF BRIEF

Volume I: Issue II

February 2021

## Disability Employment Challenges & Opportunities Resulting from COVID-19

Improving employment rates for people with disabilities has been a long-term challenge for the U.S. economy. For many years, only 30% of working age people with disabilities were employed, compared to 75% of people without disabilities. In the spring of 2020, as the novel coronavirus, known as COVID-19, spread into a global pandemic, it led to high unemployment for all workers – particularly for workers with disabilities. As 2021 begins, the unemployment rate is improving; however, people with disabilities are disproportionately out-of-work. According to the [January 2021 n-TIDE Report](#) from the Kessler Foundation and the University of New Hampshire, only 28.7% of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 70.5% of people without disabilities. As the economy recovers, steps must be taken to increase job opportunities for people with disabilities, so they are not left behind.



As a funder focused on empowering youth with disabilities to lead productive lives, the **Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation (MEAF)** convened a meeting of a dozen of its grantees on December 9, 2020. The participating nonprofit, educational, and industry leaders, who work across the disability spectrum, discussed the challenges of preparing youth with disabilities for the workforce and placing them in jobs during the pandemic, as well as potential employment opportunities that have emerged.

### The Shift from In-Person to Remote Employment

Remote employment is not new for people with disabilities. Working at home has been a practical option when workplaces are inaccessible or accessible transportation is not available. Virtual employment has also proved helpful if individuals have environmental sensitivities, scheduling challenges, or health concerns. Employers willing to provide flexible options have allowed employees with disabilities to be productive team members.

As employers across the country shifted to remote employment due to the pandemic, some people with disabilities had the competitive advantage of having remote work experience; however, they are also now competing for remote work opportunities with people without disabilities.



Several challenges—from having adequate internet access to the impact on mental health—were identified in performing work remotely for people with disabilities; yet there are also benefits. Youth entering the workforce, who tend to be more tech savvy than their older peers, now have an opportunity to search for virtual work nationally, if employers are willing to hire remote employees beyond the communities where they are located.

### Remote Jobs for Disabled Youth Entering the Workforce

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| <p><u>Challenges</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competition for work/finding opportunities</li> <li>• Internet access/quality</li> <li>• Lack of technology skills and interview strategies</li> <li>• Skill retention</li> <li>• Social isolation/impact on mental health</li> </ul> | <p><u>Benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to access and transportation removed</li> <li>• Can job search nationally</li> <li>• Youth more tech savvy</li> <li>• Reduced social anxiety and more virtual social opportunities as co-workers work from home</li> </ul> |
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**Career Launch @ Perkins**  
converted from residential to online training. Learn more at <https://youtu.be/l97T5BFqIW>

For example, a graduate of Perkins School for the Blind's Career Launch program – which trains blind and visually impaired young adults for careers in customer success – was going to lose her job after covid hit because she needed to move back home. With coaching from Perkins, she successfully advocated with her Massachusetts employer to be allowed to work remotely after covid hit; she is still with that employer a year later.

Thinking outside the box during the pandemic is helping to expand the hiring pool for employers, and the potential for people with disabilities to secure jobs. However, another challenge that Perkins identified was that many employers utilize software systems that are not accessible to screen readers, which

effectively eliminates the ability of people with visual impairments to enter the workforce. Having accessible technology available is essential, especially for virtual work.

## Industry Matters – Essential vs Non-essential Work

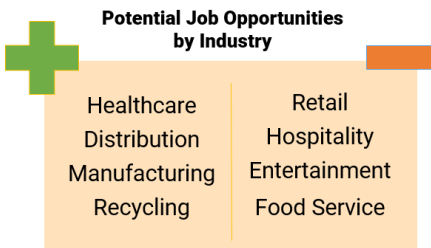
While many jobs can be performed remotely, many more must be performed in-person, particularly those that young people – including young people with disabilities – might take for their first jobs, such as retail, food service, and hospitality jobs. Unfortunately, these industries have been the hardest hit by the pandemic.

Finding and accepting in-person work at this time can be especially challenging for people with disabilities:

- It may not be safe to go to work for those that are immuno-compromised,
- Traditional barriers to employment, such as accessible public transportation, is even more complicated as municipalities curtail public transportation services, and
- Staffing cuts at social service organizations may limit the availability of supports, such as job coaches.



**Project SEARCH** is a high school internship program leading to jobs for people with cognitive disabilities, including as essential workers at hospitals. Watch a CBS Denver interview: <https://youtu.be/v9oA91FU0q0>



However, if one can report to work there are sectors of the economy—deemed as essential—where workers are in-demand, such as in healthcare, distribution, and manufacturing. As some employees in these industries have left work due to their own health concerns or family situations, people with disabilities who are not immuno-compromised can step in to provide a loyal workforce for these industries that need workers.



**Blue Star Recyclers** – a social enterprise that employs people with autism in recycling jobs – struggled with commercial e-waste supply chain challenges during the pandemic but moved to residential recycling to keep its workforce employed. **e-Stewards** – a national industry association – has implemented disability employment training, based on Blue Star’s model, with other recyclers to learn how to tap into this loyal talent pool. Learn more at: <https://youtu.be/omnzJpa7Me8>



## Job Prep and Placement for Youth with Disabilities

While essential work and remote employment, which will likely remain prevalent after the pandemic, present opportunities for people with disabilities to access jobs, preparing young people for employment during the pandemic and placing them in jobs has been challenging.

The vital nonprofit organizations that provide school to work training and transition services have faced numerous obstacles:

- The loss of revenue from government contracts and cancelled fundraisers have led to staff reductions,
- Schools shifting to remote learning have limited the ability to provide comprehensive services like vocational training,
- The need to convert training to the new digital environment, and
- Businesses that violate labor laws by replacing paid workers with unpaid interns to save costs.

However, many of these organizations have met the challenges head-on and adapted by investing in technology, holding virtual open houses and conferences, digitizing curriculum, developing videos, insisting on good labor practices, and providing vocational training focused on fields where remote work and essential jobs are available.

## Needs Identified to Help Empower Youth with Disabilities

Several recommendations surfaced for schools and service providers, as well as employers, to help youth with disabilities in their quest for employment:

### For Schools/Service Providers

- Create improved career exploration resources for students.
- Offer HR training that highlights people with disabilities as a reliable source of talent.
- Teach digital literacy to students.
- Prepare students for remote employment, essential jobs, skilled work, and new fields.
- Convert training and materials to digital formats for online delivery.
- After the pandemic, continue with hybrid training to increase service delivery.

### For Employers

- Participate in disability employment training and ensure technology is accessible.
- Participate in online mentoring programs and offer virtual tours to help youth build job readiness skills and expose students to career opportunities.
- Increase paid internship opportunities.
- Open-up recruitment to out-of-state employees for remote jobs.
- After the pandemic, continue flexible, work-from-home employment options

**EXCEPTIONAL MINDS**

KATE, EXCEPTIONAL MINDS CLASS OF 2020  
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR, NICKELODEON

Exceptional Minds – an academy and studio for visual effects animators and artists with autism – closed its in-person LA academy at the start of the pandemic but quickly converted to 100% on-line training allowing for national recruitment and job placement. Learn more at: <https://youtu.be/jl5ZlqVZB0o>



## Conclusion

While the ongoing pandemic continues to present challenges in helping youth with disabilities successfully transition to the workforce, there is hope and opportunity.

There are effective virtual vocational training options that prepare young people with disabilities for careers in the digital world, as well as opportunities to work in essential businesses. Many service providers have adapted their programming and have expanded their ability to serve more people in diverse geographic locations. Beyond the pandemic, businesses are likely to continue remote employment options, which will provide new employment opportunities for youth with disabilities, if youth are prepared and empowered to seize those opportunities.



The Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation (MEAF), based in the Washington, DC area, was established in 1991 by Mitsubishi Electric Corporation and the Mitsubishi Electric U.S. companies, which produce, sell, and distribute a wide range of consumer, industrial, commercial, and professional electronics products. The Foundation has contributed more than \$20 million to organizations that are empowering young people with disabilities to lead more inclusive and productive lives. To learn more, visit [www.MEAF.org](http://www.MEAF.org).

Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation is helping to work toward achieving the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.



## Disability Employment Meeting Participants

### American Association of People with Disabilities

- Christine Liao, MSW, Programs Manager
- Jasmine Bailey, Manager of Business Operations

### Blue Star Recyclers

- Bill Morris, Founder

### Butler Tech – Project LIFE

- Reena Fish, Project LIFE Replication Coordinator

### Cincinnati Children’s Hospital – Project SEARCH

- Erin Riehle, Co-Director
- Maryellen Daston, PhD, Consultant/Grants & Communications
- Dennis Cleary, OTD, Sr. Researcher

### e-Stewards

- Salomé Stähli, Certification Director

### Exceptional Minds Design Studio

- Barbara Bruno, Director of Enterprise Planning

### Gallaudet University –

- Conrad Baer, Undergraduate Assistant, Motion Light Lab, Visual Language and Visual Learning

### James Emmett & Co.

- James Emmett, Owner/CEO

### MDI, Inc.

- Peg McQuillan Porter, Director of Development

### Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation

- Kevin R. Webb, MA, Sr. Director
- Tara M.P. Havlicek, Program Officer

### Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs Foundation / Fabricators & Manufacturers Association, International

- Edward C. Dernulc, Director-Foundation

### Perkins School for the Blind

- Nicole Gardner, Director of Career Launch
- Angel Nash, Associate Director of Career Services
- Amy Peters, Development Officer, Institutional Giving

### Science Buddies

- Sandra Slutz, PhD, Vice President of STEM Education

### Univ. of New Hampshire – Institute on Disability

- Dan Habib, Project Director & Filmmaker in Residence