

Pathways to Competitive Integrated Employment

Brandon's Story

Meet Brandon, a determined and ambitious individual who transitioned from 14 years in a sheltered workshop to community employment. With support from Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), an employment specialist, and a job coach, he gained experience at Ryan's Restaurant and Hearthside Bakery before landing a job at Big Lots.

Despite setbacks like layoffs, complex job application processes, and scheduling difficulties, Brandon persevered. He credits his success to support, self-advocacy, and a positive attitude.

Background

Brandon is a diligent and focused worker who spent 14 years in a sheltered workshop. He always dreamed of working in the community. Before his time in the workshop, he volunteered and worked at Purdue University, an experience arranged by his high school. This experience gave him a taste of what it felt like to hold a job in the wider world and sparked his long-term goal of seeking a community-based position.



Finding Purpose at Work

Determined to achieve his goal, Brandon's case manager supported him in partnering with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), an employment specialist, and a job coach. These supports introduced him to a variety of work opportunities. His first community job was at Ryan's Restaurant, where he worked for approximately two years and gained experience in the service industry. His role there ended suddenly when the position was cut. Fearlessly, Brandon turned to his case manager and VR counselor for help. This support helped him land a new job at Hearthside Bakery. He enjoyed working there as a packer and later a utility worker. He then faced another setback when the bakery had to lay off several employees, including him.

Despite these challenges, Brandon never lost sight of his desire to be part of the community workforce.

For more information: [Center on Community Living and Careers/Employment](#)

He kept searching and eventually secured a position at Big Lots, a larger chain than he originally thought he could handle. With support from his employment team, he completed online applications, an intimidating process due to his difficulty with extensive reading and writing. He was offered an interview almost immediately Big Lots offered him the job. At the time of his second interview with us, Brandon had been there for 11 weeks and was thriving in his new role.

Navigating Challenges

Though Brandon has enjoyed success, his journey hasn't been without obstacles. Losing jobs twice felt quite discouraging. He leaned on his case manager, employment specialist, and VR counselors to find fresh leads rather than losing momentum in his job search. Another challenge for Brandon is reading and writing. Brandon sometimes struggles with reading instructions and filling out forms, so having a supportive manager and coworkers who have stepped in for more complex tasks made all the difference. He also wears a back brace and adheres to a strict lifting limit, which helps him handle physical tasks safely.

Brandon struggles when his routines are disrupted. For example, he has had to work on being flexible with his schedule when he is called in on short notice or dealing with ever-changing work hours, Brandon

appreciates that his manager at Big Lots respects his need for clear schedules and occasional accommodations. He carefully monitors how many hours he works each month to avoid losing his Social Security benefits, underscoring how attentive and conscientious Brandon is about maintaining his financial stability and independence.

Ingredients for Success

- **Accessing Supports:** Brandon points to the steady support of professionals, friends, and family as crucial to his success. Along with VR, his employment specialist and job coach guided him to community opportunities that matched his interests. Building practical experience at Ryan's Restaurant, Hearthside Bakery, and Purdue University gave him confidence, while each new position contributed lessons about his capabilities and preferences.
- **Practicing Self-Advocacy:** Brandon's willingness to self-advocate and share his needs—such as requesting reading and writing assistance, using a back brace, and clarifying his schedule—allowed his employers to provide reasonable accommodations. Over time, he learned how determination, support, and self-awareness can open the door to fulfilling community employment.

Words of Wisdom

Brandon believes that having faith in your ability to succeed is essential, as is looking for a job that truly fits your interests and abilities. He mentions the importance of deciding if or when to disclose a disability, suggesting people think carefully about how it might affect their job search.

He also advises practicing independence—managing tasks on one's own whenever possible—so that work in the community feels more natural. Brandon once imagined a future as a lawyer, he remains open to possibilities, comfortable in the knowledge that each new step can offer an opportunity to grow. Today, he's grateful for his position at Big Lots, where he enjoys helping customers, working alongside supportive colleagues, and embracing his independence.



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