

InVisible InCourage with Paula Vieillet

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Transcription provided by Stacie Valle for Virtual VRI

Kellie Pokrifka: Hello everyone! Welcome back! Today I have Paula Vieillet from Disability Options about getting back into the workforce.

What is My Employment Options?

Paula Vieillet: We help people through the Ticket to Work program, through the Social Security administration that allows people to try working without losing their cash benefits or their healthcare benefits. So there is zero risk to try working and we guide people through the process from start to finish. That can be 8 years later with long term follow up. If they need a different career or health needs change, we are there for them. We got 16 people back to work last week!

Kellie Pokrifka: That's a lot of people! Incredible. So what is My Ticket to Work?

Paula Vieillet: This is the best government program out there that no one knows about. It is a federal program and anyone receiving SSI or SSDI between 18-64 qualify for the program. There is a whole list of employment networks that people can choose from. All sorts of providers, and we are just one of them. We are a GREAT provider, but the purpose of the program is to offer choice to people with disabilities. Some people might specialize in Autism or other developmental disabilities.

Kellie Pokrifka: So cool. How did you get involved?

Paula Vieillet: I was working as a vocational evaluator for businesses or states and I would test people with standardized tests and

interview them and come up with ideas if they would be a good retraining candidate, or could I help them and redirect them. When Ticket came about it was a natural progression for me. It fits my skills completely. When I started it was just me, and now I have I think 28 people.

Kellie Pokrifka: Very exciting! How many people do you typically place per year?

Paula Vieillet: About 500. We could double it if more people knew about the program.

Kellie Pokrifka: So how does someone get involved?

Paula Vieillet: I would go to either our website [Myemploymentoptions](#) and we can assess you and see where you might be a good fit, or to the Ticket to work website.

Kellie Pokrifka: What kinds of jobs are there for working from home?

Paula Vieillet: We help with both from home and on site. Work from home is just exploding. We have been working directly with employers now since 2008. We have a relationship with them. We prescreen and test everyone and we assess their ability to do a call center or technical support job and we send people we think will do well. We don't want to set people up for failure. A person might only type 20 WPM and they can't keep up in a customer service typing job. And we know that. So we help them get to the right place with a job goal. There are so many other kinds of jobs, accounting, financial, human resources, lots of sales jobs from home, healthcare - there is more healthcare and so many different kinds of nursing jobs from home. They are looking for contact tracers. If someone has

COVID-19 they go back and figure out who they have been around to contain this. Everyday I look and there are more work from home jobs.

Kellie Pokrifka: That is huge! Once they go back into these positions, are accommodations available?

Paula Vieillet: There are. The first thing a person needs to do is know what kind of accommodations they need. American employer is required to provide reasonable accommodations, but in my opinion the actual employee that works for them needs to know that and you need to look for a job that will allow that.

Kellie Pokrifka: So many accommodations are easy, such as more breaks. But a lot of employers and employees don't know that is an option. For example, work from home is an option. What else do people use?

Paula Vieillet: Extra time for training can be very helpful. They may get headsets if they have a physical issue. Maybe an accommodation for how they train and get instructions. For example, some people do better with video where they can see someone doing something. Other people do better with written instructions to read. Knowing what works for you ... I had an employee that asked me to send her what we discussed in writing.

Kellie Pokrifka: When you said they are required, what does that mean?

Paula Vieillet: I don't know what that means for you. Do you need to be in a room that isn't noisy? Maybe you have ADD and are distracted. Or maybe you are light sensitive, or chemical sensitivities. Some people need to work from home because of that and they can't

go out and about. They are used to this now.

Kellie Pokrifka: When I asked about required, is it by law or company policy?

Paula Vieillet: It is a law. If the employer has over 50 employees it is mandatory. The employers are pretty good about all that now. When the ADA first came out it was difficult because they didn't know and would ask all kinds of questions that aren't allowed. But often the clients don't know so we coach them and explain what they can legally be asked about.

Kellie Pokrifka: Another question - when applying for any of these, when do you tell your employer?

Paula Vieillet: I am not sure you ever have to. The kind of job we try to help a person find is one that plays on their strengths and abilities. You might need to tell your boss "I need more frequent breaks and I can get a doctors note if needed" and ask if that is a problem. If someone is a secretary, they can ask "how long will I be on the keyboards? Typing all day, on doing filing and phones also?" If you have carpal tunnel you can't type all day. We address the concern.

Kellie Pokrifka: If you want those accommodations do you need to disclose the need for them while applying?

Paula Vieillet: No, you disclose when you need the accommodation.

Kellie Pokrifka: If you put in a job application, do you recommend not disclosing the disability?

Paula Vieillet: Correct. It is not a qualification.

Kellie Pokrifka: That is useful advice.

Paula Vieillet: It is difficult. You want to be honest but the information you put down could only hurt you. The stereotypes we all still have. An example I give Clients: let's say you are in a leg cast and you need a friend to take you to the doctors and you need to be in your car. So John has never had an automobile accident but George had an accident 6 months ago that wasn't his fault. Who would you ask? That's the example. It usually makes a difference.

Kellie Pokrifka: That's very helpful. Are there any factors one should consider about which jobs to apply to when living with a disability?

Paula Vieillet: Absolutely. That's the hardest part. We work with people, I wrote a book "Disabilities for Different Abilities" and we want to know interests, values and strengths. I can't help a person until I know who they are. We use that with everyone we work with. For example, I had one guy, I'll call him Mike. Mike had been a VR client for years and he never went back to work. No one was successful with him.

I brought my book out and went over his work preferences, and he prefers 3rd shift. Most counselors assume everyone wants 1st shift, but that isn't true. People have different preferences, maybe they have difficulty waking up early because of medication they take, or they don't want to be around too many people. It is really important when we are assessing job goals and transferable skills, to do that before you start applying. Then you have a better chance of finding a job that will work for you. So back to Mike, he puts down 3rd shift. So I start thinking, what jobs (he doesn't have a college education) and he likes comic books. What would accommodate that? It is easy to come up with different jobs now.

Kellie Pokrifka: That is so cool.

Paula Vieillet: So what is 3rd shift? Stockers, hotel security, bank proofers, some are always 3rd shift. I asked him about security, and he had never thought about it. I said a gate guard at an apartment, or at a retirement home. The next week he was in training and a month later he was working. That is why it is good to get an assessment.

Kellie Pokrifka: How long do the assessments take?

Paula Vieillet: It depends on the referral source. When I did them for works comp we had 20 hours. I have that thought when I work for people and to look at them at 20 hours and say "where are we going with this, are we needing to change tracks?" It just depends.

Kellie Pokrifka: That's really great. A common misconception about people on disability is that people don't want to go back to work. Is that the case?

Paula Vieillet: Not my experience at all. I think there are a lot of people that want to work waiting for me to find a job they can do. Maybe they can't keep a routine, or they have inappropriate behavior I can't do anything with, but there will be a job out there for them.

Kellie Pokrifka: So many of us with invisible disabilities can't go back to work, but for many it can be empowering and to have that control over your life.

Paula Vieillet: It changes lives. People are so grateful and excited about going back to work. They make great employees. I hired about 75% of my staff as people with known disabilities and the rest of us just aren't diagnosed yet. [[Laughter.]]

If you have been sitting home for 8 years, and bored stiff, and now you have an opportunity to help people get back to work - people just love what they do and to have a routine and a sense of purpose. It is very therapeutic for so many people and their families. I truly believe in that if you can go back to work, or you want to, look out there. Call us. Maybe something you haven't heard of yet.

Kellie Pokrifka: That is incredible. How has the pandemic affected all this?

Paula Vieillet: The job market is changing. We have some clients that have been furloughed and they are hopefully getting unemployment or something. The jobs in the communities have changed. Still a lot of essential worker jobs out there but the ones that aren't essential are laid off. I have a client that was a daycare worker at a Y and she is furloughed. She is looking for another job and she had an interview at Panera Bread. I was surprised when she said it was a group interview. She said there were 20 people that came at 2:00.

Kellie Pokrifka: That sounds very intimidating.

Paula Vieillet: I think if you know it will happen you can think it through and know what to expect, but if you don't know then it can be scary.

Kellie Pokrifka: Absolutely. It is intimidating to start with, and then if thrown into that.

Paula Vieillet: You will probably see more of that now. Employers are hiring by the thousands. FedEx, UPS, Amazon, the grocery stores. It is unbelievable how many jobs there are. But with people with

disability the essential jobs can put your health at risk so it isn't great for some people. Not all disabilities are more vulnerable, but many are. So work at home is a lot to get used to. People are doing it now that never have before. I ask how they like it and they say "I love it!" More time for family, No dry cleaner, No sitting in traffic, etc. They want to continue working at home when everything lifts. I don't think work at home is going to go away. I have heard this from many people. And employers like it - no need for job accommodations for people with a disability.

Kellie Pokrifka: That would open up so many opportunities for people with a disability.

Paula Vieillet: I had a guy with Stage 4 bone cancer. He started a Go Fund Me to avoid eviction. 2 weeks later he calls me up and says he is going back to work. I'm like, really?? He was working for a call center and they called him back. He was starting on Monday. He worked from his bed!

Kellie Pokrifka: Wow. That is grit.

Paula Vieillet: That is the power of the Ticket to Work program. Before this people with disabilities were too afraid. I still feel the misinformation out there prevents people from working. If you know you won't lose your Medicaid or medicare when you go back, that would help.

Kellie Pokrifka: How long is the try out period good for?

Paula Vieillet: For 9 months, if you are on SSDI you get to keep all your money from work. But you also get to keep your money from disability legally. You don't have to hide it. You had better not hide it! Let's say you are in month 4 and your diabetes is acting up and you

can't work anymore. You call the Social Security rep up and explain that you can't work right now and for whatever reason if you decide not to work they start your check back up. Then the Social Security rep will make an SGA decision. If they say "you have found good competitive employment and I will stop your check." But then they have another 3 years that they can just call and say "my job ended, I need my disability back." Then you get another 3 years after that where you have to reapply, but it is expedited reinstatement. I had a staff member, Suzanne, got cancer for the 3rd time. She was 2 months before finishing the program completely, and she called the rep back up and said she couldn't work anymore. So she went back on disability.

While she was waiting to get expedited disability, the Social Security rep will pay you themselves during that process for 6 months until you are reaccepted.

Kellie Pokrifka: That's really nice.

Paula Vieillet: I think it should be on every job source out there.

Kellie Pokrifka: People need to know that. It could change lives, that's a huge security net.

Paula Vieillet: And they have free help. During that whole time if they need counseling, and we explain what is happening and we access their records to make sure we have accurate information about what Social Security is counting as work.

Kellie Pokrifka: And its free for them?

Paula Vieillet: It is free for everyone. Employers and clients.

Kellie Pokrifka: That can help so many people. Thank you so much for talking on that.

One more question before we go. Through your darkest days and your toughest hours, what gives you the courage to get through one more day?

Paula Vieillet: Sometimes it is one more 5 minutes. I have techniques like yoga and breathing exercises. A lot of guided exercises. I have had dark moments since I was a kid so I am a bit used to what I need to do for me. If you know what helps you, turn to that. If you don't know, get up and walk outside and get some air. Go play the piano, or do something that makes you happy to be alive. My go-to when it is really tough is Indian food.

Kellie Pokrifka: I love that! Awesome! Well thank you so much Paula, this has been so helpful and I hope people will reach out and be more aware of their options.

Paula Vieillet: We hope to see you at My Employment Options and if you need help give us a call.

Kellie Pokrifka: Thank you so much and we hope to see you on Saturday!

[End of interview]