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Hadley Presents

Keeping Your Job After Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, Chief Program Officer Ed Haines along with learning expert Steve Kelley join us to discuss keeping your job after vision loss. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Steve Kelley: Hey, Ricky.

Ed Haines: Thanks, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: It is so great to have you both here. We're discussing a topic that I think is incredibly important. Really looking forward to just jumping right into things, listening to the history behind some of this, and just giving some tips and tricks for something that can initially feel really traumatic for people. I think having that knowledge of what do you do next really can take away some of that fear.

Before we get into the topic, I would like to give a chance for each of you to introduce yourselves. I think since both of you have been on the show before, although you may be new to some people, why don't we keep the introductions to just tell us a bit about how you are familiar with the process of what happens for maintaining employment after vision loss? Ed, we'll start with you. You've been pretty instrumental in creating Hadley's new series on keeping your job after vision loss, so how did you become knowledgeable about this topic?

Ed Haines: Sure, Ricky. Thanks. Thanks for giving a plug for this new series. I'd love to talk about that a little bit, too. I currently work for Hadley, but for many years I was a vocational rehabilitation counselor for both the state of Indiana and the state of Michigan, and I was a voc rehab counselor for people with vision loss specifically, so I've spent a lot of years helping individuals with vision loss figure out their employment goals and figure out how they can achieve those goals.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. How about you, Steve?

Steve Kelley: Thanks, Ricky. Yeah, I ended up getting a certification as a vision rehab therapist and I've also got a certification for rehab counseling. Although I didn't spend nearly as much time as Ed doing vocational rehab, I did an internship there and worked pretty closely with the vocational rehab counselors in the state that I live in.

Ricky Enger: Fantastic. We have, as we alluded to a bit ago, we've just launched a series on the Hadley website that goes through this particular topic, what kinds of things do you need to know as you are losing your vision and you want to continue to work, how does all that happen? Why do you think it's an important thing to have?

Ed Haines: Well, Hadley's all about helping adults discover new ways to do things that have been made difficult by vision loss. One of those things is keeping your job, right? For a lot of people, work is really, really important on so many levels, not just because of the income, but because it helps us be a contributing member of society. It gives meaning to our lives. It provides socialization. There's a million reasons why people want to stay on the job. When you receive a diagnosis of vision loss, a lot of folks just assume that their work life is going to be over at that point, and that is just not the case. We've launched two workshops. One's called “Staying on the Job” and the other one's called “Talking with Your Employer,” trying to give folks just some basic steps, basic things to think about before they take a drastic step of leaving their employment.

Ricky Enger: Steve, I guess you've experienced this from a couple of different perspectives. You have worked with people who are facing this predicament of, "Oh, no, what do I do next? This is all pretty overwhelming and scary," and I think you've been that person before, too. One thing I always wonder about is how much awareness the average everyday person in the general public who has no experience with vision loss, are they even aware that people who have problems with their vision are in the workforce?

Steve Kelley: Do we have a scale that's below zero here? [Laughs] Because no, absolutely not and we just have developed I think these preconceived notions of what people with a vision loss or blindness can and can't do. Often, there's no basis in reality, because I just don't think that we often have a whole lot of exposure to people in the workplace who are there using assistive technology and doing things in a different way. What happens is when you find yourself in that situation, you're going to those preconceived notions that you have and asking yourself, "Oh, gosh, what can I do? What will I be able to do?" because you really just have no clue. Not only that, you have people that show up after years of not knowing where to turn because they didn't know how to find vocational rehab.

Ricky Enger: That's an excellent point. I think you really hit the nail on the head. When you talk about that moment of, "What will I do? What can I do? I don't know anything about any of this and what I do know is not always positive." If somebody is just diagnosed, they're in that period of, "Whoa, what do I do?", what's the first thing that you would tell them about what to do regarding their job?

Ed Haines: Well, the first thing I tell them is what not to do, and if at all possible, I would say, "Don't quit your job right out of the gate. Take some time first before you make that decision." I mean, you may need the income, you may like your job for a number of other reasons. I've known so many folks who, when they receive a diagnosis of vision loss, everything's so overwhelming, they're wondering about transportation. They're wondering about home; they're wondering about their family. It may be difficult to do things at home as well as in the work environment and so it seems like just the logical thing to do is just get rid of one of those variables and say, "Okay, I'm going to quit work if possible."

We've just launched these workshops not that long ago and we already, I saw a comment the other day from an individual who took the workshop and said, "Boy, if I had taken this before, I wouldn't have quit my job. I wish I hadn't." It's much easier to stay on a job that you already do than to get a brand-new job. That's true for anyone, whether you have vision loss or not. That's the first step, don't quit right out of the gate, look at your options first.

Steve Kelley: Yeah. I think that's so true, Ed. I go back to what I was saying before is that oftentimes we simply don't know how that job might be done with less vision because we haven't seen anybody do it, we are unfamiliar with any of the technology usually, and we're not getting a whole lot of help from the doctors, which isn't to say that the doctors aren't helpful, you get escorted out of the office, "Well, there's nothing more that we can do." That just means medically. You end up in this situation where you're just wandering around in this no man's land wondering what the heck you're going to do. Ed, you're so right. I mean, there are just so many options, there are accommodations, and there is technology that can be applied to almost any job, keeping that job. It's so much easier to keep the job than to try to find a new job, particularly when you've got that new diagnosis, or you're just learning some new skills with that vision impairment, I think finding that new job is then 10 times more difficult sometimes.

Ricky Enger: Then who helps with that? If you're looking around and saying, "Well, I don't know what to do. Surely there are professionals then who can give me some advice," who does that, and how do people find them?

Ed Haines: The good news, Ricky, is that yes, there are professionals that can guide you on this journey and help you out. There is a specific program that's paid for by the federal government that's a consequence of an active legislation and that's called vocational rehabilitation. Every state has a vocational rehabilitation program, and it is specifically designed to help individuals with disabilities stay on the job or become employed. That is the place you need to make a beeline for because once you establish an open case and a relationship with a state vocational rehabilitation counselor, they can help then line you up with the other professionals that are out there that can address different aspects of your job and how to keep it. Some of those professionals might be an orientation and mobility specialist who can help you learn to get around your work environment safely, an adaptive technology specialist who's going to help the technology at your work site and make sure it's accessible to you, and a number of other individuals, so there's a lot of folks out there to help, but you have to go seek out that help, and the place to start is vocational rehabilitation.

Steve Kelley: There's no cost for that either. I think that's one of the things that also is often misunderstood when a persons on the fence like this, they're worried about, "What are these things going to cost?" A lot of those professionals are paid for through state and federal funding.

Ricky Enger: That's got to be such a relief to people because if you're already worried about your income and, "How am I going to keep this going and keep my family fed?", the last thing I want to think about is spending more money that I may not have to address this issue. When people start to think about what they might do to stay on the job, vision loss can impact a number of different things, and some of it maybe you need to learn some technology, and some of it may just be, "I need better lighting," or what have you. I just learned this recently, that there are three general types of changes that you could make to your job in order to keep it. Ed, can you expand on that a bit?

Ed Haines: There are three general types of changes, and they overlap, but the first would be is that you may need to just adapt your work environment to fit your level of vision. That could be something as simple as moving your desk or your workstation away from a big window that causes glare, that could mean having your coworkers make sure that aisles are kept free of debris to make sure that you can navigate safely down the aisle. Most ways of altering your work environment are fairly simple. The great thing is you don't have to figure that out on your own. You can have a workplace accommodation assessment made, your voc rehab counselor can set that up, and you'll be surprised how many small changes can be made that will make just your environment more accessible to you.

Then another type of change is learning new skills that will be used in your current job. For instance, if you use a computer now, you may have to learn how to use a computer with speech access, for instance, rather than primarily visually. You may want to learn braille so you can access print in a different way. There's a lot of new skills you can acquire that can help keep you doing what it is you want to do.

Then finally, there are just a plethora of adaptive devices that will help you use tools, whatever work tools they are, to make sure you can still use them and use them with your current level of vision. That's basically the three areas, change your work environment, acquire new skills, and employ adaptive devices.

Ricky Enger: Do either of you have a story about an accommodation that you had never thought of, or maybe assisting someone in maintaining their employment, and you had to look for something that just stood out in some way as far as an accommodation that actually worked to help somebody maintain their employment?

Ed Haines: Yeah, I can give a great example. It's a wonderful example. I worked with a Catholic priest who was unable to drive. Priests do have to drive, especially in rural areas, they have to drive from church to church, it's a prerequisite of the job. I talked to him and then he and I talked to his Bishop and the Bishop ended up assigning him to a place called Mackinac Island where cars are not allowed. We just took driving out of the equation. He was able to minister to a new parish and keep working and doing what he wanted to do, so that was a really fun kind of accommodation.

Ricky Enger: Wow. I love it. It just goes to show that no matter what it is that you were doing, and you have this seemingly insurmountable obstacle, there are ways around that. I think that's probably going to be relieving for a lot of people. I would imagine that one of the most nerve-wracking things that you have to do in a situation like this is telling your boss what's going on, figuring out just kind of the right way to talk about what's happening so that you can get the accommodations that you need, and so that fear of actually losing the job because of something beyond your control can be negated a little bit. Are there things that you should know before you ever even open that topic of conversation with your boss?

Steve Kelley: I just did a review not too long ago of the Talking With Your Employer workshop. One of the great recommendations, and there were several, just to try too familiar yourself. You're not going to become a lawyer or anything like that, but become familiar with some of the terminology that is used. The word "accommodations," for example. Just use the same kind of language that's used in the legislation, or the ADA. And having a really good understanding, or as good an understanding as you can have of what's going on with your vision at the moment, and what it is that you need. And if you can be specific about your needs, that's so helpful because just like you, very few people around you are really going to know much about this, so you need to become the expert as much as you can, and really be an advocate about those specific things. I think that that is helpful moving forward and just relax and realize that there is a way forward. A lot of times people are very willing to help. One of the things that has always struck me is if you're a loyal employee, your employer wants to keep you right there on the job. They don't want you to go any place, so recognize that as a loyal employee, people want you to stay, and your employer wants to work with you.

Ricky Enger: That's a fantastic point because you may be feeling at a pretty low point yourself and thinking, you're questioning so many things, one of which might be, "Am I really that valuable? Am I easily replaceable?", or whatever, and someone who has worked hard is a loyal employee has made a name for themselves in one way or another in the organization, they don't want you to go anywhere. Is there one approach that works better than any other for talking to your boss? Or can you talk based on whatever your relationship is with your boss and knowing what that's like? Are there some dos and don'ts there, or is it pretty much as long as you're familiar with what it is you need, keep that in mind, and any approach you take is going to work?

Ed Haines: It depends on everyone's unique situation. There's no right time to talk to your employer and there's no right way, but there are some don'ts. It's mainly one don't, don't come in unprepared. You need to come to that conversation with preparation, with practice, and be able to provide positive solutions. You're an asset to that employer. Your job is to let them know you're going to continue to be an asset to them and here's how you're going to do it. It doesn't hurt to do a whole lot of homework, and again, employ those professionals that are there in the background to help you do it. I always recommend to people, don't go into that conversation unless you've practiced it a whole bunch. Practice with friends, relations, anybody you can find, and make sure you have your spiel down. You'll be ready for questions that may come up. Again, your vocal rehab counselor can help with that.

Steve Kelley: It's so contrary, I think, to the way you might be feeling at the time because something like this can really impact your self-esteem in a negative way, right, so I think it's so important, as Ed said, to actually sit down and start talking about it, explore it with your family and friends and people that you trust and talk about it a little bit more so that you become more comfortable talking about it. You'll also become more curious about it and find out more information and become a much better advocate, and really, that's what your employer wants to hear. Your employer wants to hear you solving whatever the problem happens to be and coming up with positive solutions.

Ricky Enger: Fantastic points, both of you. But what if after all that, you've done some soul-searching, and for whatever reason, you decide that your current job is just not going to work anymore, whether it's because of changes that have happened because of your vision loss, or maybe you're just ready to make a change, so many other things are happening in your life, and now you're ready to, "I always wondered what it would be like to do this job and I'm ready to try that now." What can you do to get new job skills, to find new ways to do things, and to seek out that new career?

Ed Haines: Well, the good news is that the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, one of the things they do is to help people become retrained. That can be anything from a vocational program to, even to college. Each state has their own rules and regulations as to how and when they do that, but those services are available, so you would start by just having your vocational rehabilitation counselor help you with an interest inventory test. If you just don't have any idea at all what you'd like to do, they'll help you figure that out, and then they'll help you figure out how to get the training you need to get there.

Steve Kelley: That was one of the really cool things that I found both personally as a client and then also later working with folks is that you are in a position as a VR counselor to listen to people and reflect some of what's going on. There's a little bit of counseling that actually goes on, but I think that's one of the most valuable things that the vocational rehab counselor does for somebody is actually help during that exploration process, because you're right, not everything is necessarily going to fit after a vision loss, and sometimes it's a great opportunity for some fine-tuning. Sometimes it may not have been a good job or a good fit before that and now is a great opportunity to explore something else.

Ed Haines: Yeah, that's right. I will say one thing, I've had so many people come into my office over the years, they're out of work, and they'll say, "Okay, what do people with vision impairments do?" Well, my response is always the same, "What do you want to do? Then we'll figure out how to make it work with your vision impairment." Don't limit yourself. People with vision impairments are in all sorts of occupations. The days are over when people with vision impairments were slotted into very specific areas. What is it you want to do? We'll help you figure that out, then we’ll help you figure out how to get there.

Ricky Enger: I think it's worth mentioning also that if you're still wondering, "I got to find a voc rehab person, whatever that is, and then get started on this journey," it's worth mentioning that at Hadley, we’re here to point you to those resources in your particular area because sometimes that, too, can be a real challenge is, where am I even supposed to look to find these professionals? At Hadley, we can help with that.

We have talked a bit about the new series, which was the reason we decided to come together and record the podcast. Perhaps you're wondering, "Well, how do I even find that series?" If you are not signed up on the Hadley website, that is certainly the first step, and it's a pretty quick and easy process. We can also help you through that over the phone if you want, (800) 323-4238 is a great number to keep handy so that you can call us for any help that you need up to and including getting signed up on the website and finding this series that we've talked about a bit and experiencing that for yourself.

Thank you both so much for being here. Before we wrap up, I just want to ask each of you, if there's anything you would say to that person who is on the cusp of saying, "I just don't know if I can handle this. I'm going to go ahead and quit my job and I'll figure out the rest later," or perhaps they're in the midst of trying to figure out these accommodations and things are still a little bit difficult, what would you say to people?

Steve Kelley: I think the first thing I would do is say, "Take a breath. Step back a little bit," because number one, Ed is right, your initial instinct may be to bail on the job because you're having difficulty doing it, you don't have the skills just yet. Hold off, take a step back, check in with that vocational rehab counselor. Who knows? Maybe ultimately you will leave the job, and that's okay, but do it on your own terms.

The other thing is be open to recognize that some of your preconceived notions about what is going to happen with a vision loss and your ability to do your job or other jobs may not be accurate. In fact, I can almost guarantee it's not accurate, so just be open to what might come your way, I know it sounds odd, but the opportunities that are going to present themselves in the future for you.

Ed Haines: Well, I couldn't improve on anything Steve said, it's just the absolutely perfect response. I'll just add one other thing is that also be open to doing things in a different way. You'll find how liberating that is once you take that jump. That can apply not just to work, but also things you do around the house. If you're open to doing things differently, you'll find that you'll still be able to do what you want to do.

Ricky Enger: Fantastic. Thank you both for sharing your time and your expertise. I know it's going to be useful and impactful for so many people.

Ed Haines: Well, thanks, Ricky. It's a great topic.

Steve Kelley: Yeah, it's been a pleasure chatting with you both.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @ Hadley dot E-D-U. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.