


Action

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Working Story: Turning Adversity to Advantage

The author found that disabilities don't have to end your career but can open up trails to ones you never considered.

By Sheri Melander-Smith

When I had just turned 18, I moved to New York City to model with the renowned Eileen Ford agency. Being a model allowed me to travel all over the world, a big change for a girl from a small town in Minnesota. But by the time I was turning 25, I knew I was aging out of a business that covets youth. As it turned out, I never got to make that decision for myself. Shortly thereafter, I had a spinal cord arteriovenous malformation (AVM) rupture—a sometimes fatal hemorrhage due to a malformation of the capillaries—only hours after my father passed away from cancer. In the hospital the doctor told me I might never walk again but after 9 months of grueling physical therapy, I did regain almost full strength in both legs. As I knew I couldn't go back to the world of high fashion, I needed a new direction, a new career, so I decided to go to college. I graduated from UCLA with honors and a B.A. in psychology. After getting married and having a son, I returned to Minnesota and started working full time in children's mental health. Soon after, I went back to school to earn an MBA. I felt like I had truly overcome my initial adversity.

Changed Plans

About a year later, I started to have neuropathic symptoms again—tripping, losing my balance, feeling shooting pain in both legs. I went to the hospital for an MRI and found out the AVM had reformed. Over the following year, my symptoms worsened until I was forced to stop working entirely. After many

embolizations and two surgeries, I had the surgery that left me paralyzed. I realized I was not going to “beat it” this time; the wheelchair was here to stay.

I didn't know what to do next, but I did know that working made me feel happy and full filled. I had just finished my MBA, but I didn't know how to apply my degree with my new physical limitations. And I did want to work.

Wanting to work full time and being ready to work full time, however, are two different things. I realized that accommodating my disability started with me. I had to make an assessment of where I was and where I wanted to go and devise a plan to get there.

Ready to Work

First I had to admit that I wasn't psychologically ready to work yet. I had to come to terms with my new body and my limitations and I needed help doing this. I realized that the biggest hindrance to meeting my goal was my own fear of the unknown. I worked with a therapist to develop my self-esteem and ego strength. I knew that I needed to be physically fit to work full time, as well. I hired a trainer with the goal of building my endurance so I could make it through a full day of work with energy to spare.

I realized that I needed to figure out how to coordinate working full time with having the other parts of my life work. I needed more support to meet the demands of my new working life. I set up a schedule that included time for my son, chores, and meal preparations. I also needed to take a good look at my closet. I was not the same size anymore, and I needed a working wardrobe. I also needed proper shoes for work and a new hair cut to be presentable. Accomplishing all of this could have been

overwhelming. It is important, to take it one step at a time and accomplish your goals over time. As my mom used to say, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

When I had prepared myself for the new challenges that I was about to face, something amazing happened: Work found me. When you are strong and capable and positive, things tend to come your way. My previous boss whom I had already developed a relationship with before my disability offered me a new job.

I am now the consumer engagement specialist for Cornerstone Solutions, a unique health plan for individuals with a wide range of disabilities. Cornerstone Solutions is a partnership between Hennepin County, Minnesota, and Metropolitan Health Plan that, through a personal care guide, bridges the needs of the individual with a disability in terms of social services and physical and mental health. This is the most important job I have ever had.

Reasonable Accommodations

Although I was ready, willing, and able to work full time again, it would not have been possible without the assistance of my boss and co-workers. Having others accommodate my disability was something that was difficult for me to accept at first. I didn’t want to impose on anyone; nor did I want “special attention.” I soon realized, however, that treating people with equality doesn’t mean treating them in exactly the same way. A diverse workforce is a powerful workforce and I was there to add my part to the team.

Most disability-related work accommodations cost less than \$500. This was true in my case, too. A lot of accommodations are logistical. When I first started my job, I was working part time. I also had a team that was assigned to my job

responsibility that added to my feeling of being supported.

Initially we met weekly and this helped me stay focused on my job. Mentorship is the most important relationship you can have when re-entering



the workforce. Before I even started my job, my employers had already initiated disability awareness training into the hiring process and ongoing overall diversity plan.

As a wheelchair user, I needed some accommodations made to my worksite. My employer installed a desk that raises and lowers by a button to accommodate different wheelchairs; putting a too-short desk's legs on blocks of wood is a simple and inexpensive solution to the same problem. Handicapped door openers were installed at the restrooms and the front entrance of my workplace.

One side effect of my spinal cord injury is that I am very sensitive to cold. To accommodate this, I was moved to an office that had the overhead vent shut off. The temperature is a little warm for my service dog Maya so I also have a fan on hand to make sure she is comfortable. Having my service dog come to work with me has been so important for me to feel comfortable. My co-workers offer to walk her, bring her snacks, and play with her with my verbal okay to make a dog's long day seem shorter.

Working full time at Cornerstone Solutions has been a dream job come true for me. I am so happy every day, especially knowing that the work I do helps other individuals with disabilities lead full and productive lives. It is possible to have a disability and enjoy good health. It is possible to have a disability and have a career that is both full filling and meaningful.

Sheri Melander-Smith is a United Spinal member from Chanhassen, Minnesota.

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