Putting Creativity to Work

Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities

VSA arts

Editor and Lead Writer: Paul Scribner

This project has been made possible by grants from

Social Security Administration
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It is strange that in our society we both value and celebrate artistic accomplishment, yet all too often fail to see it as a realistic career option. We admire and stand in awe of those creative geniuses who rise to the top of their profession in fine art, theater, dance, music, or design, yet we often seem to have a disregard or even contempt for the valuable role that artists and their creations play in our personal, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and societal development. When people in our society choose to make their livelihood as an artist, it can often be a struggle.

Artists with disabilities face additional societal challenges in the career marketplace. In fact, myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions often stand in the way when people with disabilities pursue any career opportunity. As a result, unemployment is a reality for almost 70% of people with disabilities. Statistics show that people with disabilities from minority backgrounds encounter even greater difficulty in obtaining work. And, as you might expect, people with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in the arts.

Putting Creativity to Work: Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities addresses real careers, real work, and real opportunities in the arts for millions of people with disabilities. Through practical “nuts and bolts” advice and personal testimony, this book is an invaluable resource for both individual artists and those who may be in a position to further support their career decisions. For people with disabilities who seek a career in the arts, this book offers a wealth of information, advice, and resources to help you explore your career options and guide you down the creative path of your choice. No longer will artists, their families, and career counselors be burdened with the nagging question “Is it possible?” This book serves to demystify over 110 arts-related professions. It wipes away many of the uncertainties every artist
has regarding his or her ability to not only survive, but to thrive, as a visual, literary, or performing artist. My greatest hope is that this book will enlighten and encourage a vast new legion of aspiring artists to chart their own course and follow their dream, regardless of disability. I further hope this book will serve as a beacon to light the way to high-quality careers that celebrate the creative abilities and diverse viewpoints of the disability community.

Randy Souders
Professional Artist and VSA arts Board Member

Randy Souders has been a full-time professional artist for 22 years. He is owner of Souders’ Fine Art, Inc., an art services and publishing company. He has served on the board of directors for VSA arts for 12 years. He has been a quadriplegic since the age of 17.
A Message from Tony Coelho, Director
President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

The President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities has been working for more than 50 years to open doors of opportunity for people with disabilities in all fields, including the arts. We are pleased to support VSA arts in its efforts to encourage people with disabilities to pursue careers in the arts, an area often overlooked. The arts provide a wide variety of creative and rewarding opportunities for people with disabilities, allowing them to express their creativity while becoming economically self-sufficient. Even though many of the jobs in the arts are highly visible, such as acting and television newscasting, many others are not. Directing, accounting, and graphic design are just a few of the many behind-the-scenes arts jobs shown in this guide.

As people with disabilities, we must contribute our perspectives to the world of the arts if we are ever going to achieve true integration and equality. The arts are a reflection of society and too often the images of people with disabilities are crafted by someone without disability experience, usually reinforcing existing negative stereotypes. By integrating ourselves into the mainstream of the arts world, we can ensure realistic portrayals of people with disabilities.

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, the current full-employment economy, and developments in assistive technology are creating exciting opportunities for people with disabilities. The provision of adapted technology and other accommodations has enabled many of the individuals profiled in this guide to be successful in their jobs. For further information about other accommodations, the President’s Committee’s Job Accommodations Network (JAN) has on file nearly
200,000 accommodations provided to real people on real jobs. Data from JAN show that most accommodations are low cost and easy to provide.

Through this guide, people with disabilities, our families, and vocational counselors will find many valuable resources for entering careers in the arts. The guide contains information about several programs of the President’s Committee that are not specific to the arts, but could be helpful to anyone seeking employment. Whether or not you choose one of the many interesting career opportunities available in the arts, be assured that the President’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities is working to ensure that you have an equal opportunity to compete for the job you choose.

Tony Coelho
We are very excited to work with VSA arts to assist people with disabilities in pursuing careers in the arts. We believe that increasing everyone’s opportunity to contribute their talents to a wide variety of disciplines available within the arts, and making the arts more reflective of the lives of all Americans are important and achievable goals. We are delighted to be a part of this groundbreaking effort.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) administers the disability insurance program and the Supplemental Security Income program to provide cash and health benefits for persons with disabilities under the Social Security Act. Since their beginnings under the Social Security Act, SSA’s disability programs have assisted beneficiaries under these programs to test the ability to return to productive activity and increase economic self-sufficiency. Recently, to improve SSA’s service to people with disabilities who want to work, the Commissioner of Social Security established a new Office of Employment Support Programs. The Office was created to provide a focal point in Social Security for our employment support programs that assist Social Security and Supplemental Security Income beneficiaries with disabilities, and to work with other public and private entities to remove employment barriers for all people with disabilities.

SSA is pleased to provide this educational resource guide to artists with disabilities. We believe this guide provides realistic examples of people with disabilities who have been successful in pursuing careers in the various disciplines of the arts. It also offers wonderful mentoring opportunities to artists to encourage and support them in their work. We congratulate VSA arts in taking this first step in assisting our beneficiaries to achieve success in a career in the arts.

Susan M. Daniels, Ph.D.
A Message from Judith E. Heumann
Assistant Secretary, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), Department of Education

and

Fredric K. Schroeder
Commissioner, Rehabilitation Services Administration, OSERS, Department of Education

"Be all that you can be," the Army recruiting motto, is a call to all those who seek a career and not just a job. The Rehabilitation Act similarly calls persons with disabilities to look to their full potential in keeping with their abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choices. No persons, least of all individuals with disabilities, should limit their aspirations based on stereotypes.

Putting Creativity to Work: Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities is a complete blueprint for the person with a disability who aspires to a career and a livelihood in the arts. Whether interested in performing arts, writing, painting, or any one of the supporting roles that go into producing a good story, book, play, painting, dance, film, or other work of art, aspiring artists will find this guide to provide an exhaustive list of the kinds of careers and jobs available in the arts. The biographical sketches of various working artists with disabilities give personal inspiration to anyone with a creative gift.

While providing abundant encouragement, the guide is even stronger in its practical presentation of the career development process to persons who choose to work in the arts. This includes résumé and
portfolio preparation, as well as practical tips on interviews and auditions. The detailed treatment of employment for Supplemental Security Income recipients and Social Security Disability Insurance beneficiaries is especially instructional. With a comprehensive directory of arts organizations nationwide, and a review of the rights of job seekers under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the guide provides a complete resource for all creative job seekers, especially those that aspire to careers in the arts.

We urge all rehabilitation counselors to consider this career guide as a major resource in assisting consumers in obtaining meaningful employment.

We especially hope that special educators will offer this guide both as an inspiration and a practical tool to their students moving from school to work. The section on student financial aid and scholarship resources is particularly valuable for students with disabilities.

Sincerely,

Judith E. Heumann

and

Fredric K. Schroeder
VSA arts is pleased to present Putting Creativity to Work: Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities. It is carefully compiled and designed to provide information you will find valuable as both a person with a disability and someone aspiring for a career in the arts. The book begins with the description, qualifications, and salary range of more than 110 arts-related careers. Biographies of 25 artists with disabilities describe some of the strategies they used to succeed in pursuing their dreams. In addition, there are many tips and strategies to help you with a variety of career and employment issues including funding for education and training; job searching skills; tips on how to become a successful visual, performing or literary artist; information to help you navigate social services systems; and much more.

At a time when almost two-thirds of people with disabilities are unemployed, VSA arts seeks to provide you with an understanding of how you can successfully enter a competitive job market. This guide will encourage you to pursue not just any job, but a job that is creative and challenging; a job you will enjoy.

About VSA arts

“Promoting the Creative Power in People with Disabilities”

VSA arts is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting artistic excellence and providing educational opportunities through the arts for people with disabilities. Each year, VSA arts brings the power of the arts into the lives of over 5.5 million people with disabilities worldwide. Founded in 1974 by Jean Kennedy Smith as an affiliate of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the organization offers compre-
hensive programs in music, dance, drama, creative writing, and the visual arts. These programs are implemented through a network of affiliates across the United States and in more than 70 other countries worldwide.

VSA arts believes that the arts play a vital role in the lives of all people. They give us a universal language through which we enhance education, communicate experiences, and unite diverse cultures. VSA arts serves to communicate the power of the arts as a means to achieve personal growth, increase inclusion, and positively shape the lives of people with disabilities.
How to Use this Guide

This book is your resource—whether you are employed now or have never been employed before. If you are just starting to think about opportunities in the arts, you will probably want to begin with Chapter 1 and spend some time assessing your skills and interests, and thinking about the path ahead of you. Maybe you have already developed a specific interest in the arts, and you want to use Chapter 2 to find more specific information about literary arts, performing arts, visual arts and design, or arts services careers. Perhaps you are facing a specific challenge—choosing or paying for a school, finding a service that you need, dealing with Social Security or Medicare, or just navigating the working world. With the table of contents, you can easily find valuable information about these topics and many others.

It is our sincerest hope that you use this book as a reference and access it again and again as you move through your career as an artist and person with a disability. Whether you are going for your first interview, changing careers, attempting to find health insurance, or trying to move to the next level in your career, you will find information, tips, and suggestions that will aid you in your quest for success. In addition, you will find contact information for hundreds of disability and arts-related organizations, agencies, and publications throughout this book and in the appendices, which are arranged in alphabetical order.

Please let us know what you think of Putting Creativity to Work and how it worked for you. There is a feedback and evaluation form inside the front cover. Your comments will help us make future editions more useful to you and the many other people with disabilities who are working in the arts.