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Paving the way: self-advocacy as the foundation for success

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I have always envisioned myself working in the area of disability (particularly visual impairment and blindness). As a client of the MAB-Mackay Rehabilitation Center, I had access to an employment counsellor who assisted me in finding work that reflected my interest in the disability field, and who, after I completed my diploma at Dawson College in 2007, initially facilitated my introduction to the Adaptech Research Network. At the time, there were no employment

opportunities at Adaptech, but I approached Catherine Fichten (one of the co-directors of the team) with the hope that they would keep me in mind in the future. They did, and I have been working at Adaptech each summer since then.

The Adaptech Research Network is comprised of researchers and students who examine the experiences of postsecondary students with disabilities across Canada. With the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and provincial funding from the Fonds Quebecois de la recherche sur la societe et la culture (FQRSC), the Adaptech Research Network researches the barriers that hinder, and the factors which facilitate, the success of these students both in completing their studies and in obtaining employment upon graduation. Our research is disseminated in a variety of publications and shared with service providers and other professionals at various conferences. My time at Adaptech has not only enabled me to gain relevant professional skills, but has also allowed me to establish a name for myself and network with others in the field – an [Top](#) opportunity that will continue to open doors.

My work at Adaptech required me to acquire completely new skills. The RAMQ program in Quebec provided me with the adaptive technology and software I needed, and I immediately requested training on Excel and other computer programs from the MAB-Mackay Rehabilitation Center. The Employment Integration Program in Quebec also contributed to my success at Adaptech, by providing funding to defray some accommodation-related costs. Within a few weeks, I was not only completing my own work, but also supervising the work of another summer student and coordinating a large research project.

Though I have always been blind, I was mainstreamed into the regular school system from the start, and these early experiences have been invaluable. I have learned what I need to succeed in an environment that is not necessarily designed to be accessible, and I gained the ability to communicate and advocate for myself early on. I encourage parents of blind and visually impaired children (as well as their teachers) to recognize the importance of these skills, as they are the building blocks for later success. If I had never learned Braille as a child, for instance, I would have to memorize each of my conference presentations, and I would be unable to refer to my notes while still facing my audience. Instead, I am able to work and perform on an equal footing with my colleagues.

My success with Adaptech is due, in part, to my employers who recognized my dedication and interest and who gave me an opportunity to try my hand at something new, and also, to my own ability to organize and access the services available to me. I am fortunate to have an employer who understands diversity and implements the principles of universal design, though our research findings indicate that many students with disabilities experience employment discrimination and confront a number of accommodation

barriers. Though much work must still be done to level the playing field, self-advocacy and continual public education are the keys to a more inclusive society.