



# Putting Creativity to Work




## Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities




VSA arts

Editor and Lead Writer: Paul Scribner

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Social Security Administration  
American Express Company



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# Table of Contents




Foreword .....	xiv
A Message from Tony Coelho .....	xvi
A Message from Susan M. Daniels, Ph.D. . .	xviii
A Message from Judith E. Heumann and Fredric K. Schroeder .....	xix
Introduction .....	1
How to Use this Guide .....	3

## SECTION I: CLARIFYING YOUR DIRECTION .....



### Chapter 1. Knowing What's Right for You ..6

- A. Taking a Look at a Career in the Arts ...6
  - B. Knowing Yourself:
    - The Self-Assessment Process .....7
    - Knowing Your Skills .....8
    - Knowing Your Interests .....8
    - Knowing Your Values .....8
    - Knowing Your Personality .....8
  - C. Getting Additional Guidance on Self-Assessments .....9
  - D. Identifying Your Options .....10
  - E. Researching Your Options .....10
  - F. Evaluating Your Options and Designing a Course of Action .....12
    - Evaluating Options .....12
    - Taking Action .....13
- 



G. The Story of Bill .....13

H. Using the Internet as a Research Tool ..14  
 Tips on Searching the Internet .....14

**Chapter 2. Your Career Options in the Arts ..16**

A. Career Opportunities in the Literary Arts 16

B. Career Opportunities in the Performing Arts .....29

C. Career Opportunities in the Visual Arts and Design .....61

D. Career Opportunities in Arts Services ..96

E. Other Career Guides .....99  
 Career Guides for the Literary Arts ...99  
 Career Guides for the Performing Arts 101  
 Career Guides for the Visual Arts ...104  
 Other Useful Career Guides .....107

F. The Impact of Technology and the Internet on Arts Careers .....108  
 Content Creation .....108  
 Content Distribution .....108  
 Shift from Atoms to Bits .....109

**SECTION II: THE FIRST STEP TOWARD A SUCCESSFUL CAREER— TRAINING, EDUCATION, AND EXPERIENCE .....111**

**Chapter 3. Getting More Education and Professional Experience .....112**

A. Choosing an Appropriate College or University Program .....112  
 Guides to College and University Arts Programs .....112  
 Performing and Visual Arts College Fairs .....113  
 Organizations That Can Help You Pursue Higher Education .....113

B. Vocational Rehabilitation Services: An Overview .....114  
 What Is the Rehabilitation Services Administration? .....114  
 What Are Vocational Rehabilitation Services? .....114  
 What Services Can Vocational Rehabilitation Provide? .....114  
 Who Is Eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation Services? .....115  
 How Do I Get Vocational Rehabilitation Services? .....115  
 What If I Am Denied Eligibility? .....115





- C. **Internships, Apprenticeships, and Other Informal Training** .....116
  - Internships in the Literary, Performing, and Visual Arts .....117
  - Internships for People with Disabilities .....118
  - General Internship Opportunities for Students .....121
- D. **Competitions and Contests** .....124
- E. **Finding a Professional Mentor** .....127
  - What Is a Professional Mentor? .....127
  - Mentor Profile .....127
  - What to Expect from a Mentor .....128
  - Approaching a Possible Mentor .....129
  - Making Mentoring Relationships Work .....129
  - One Way to Find a Mentor .....130

**Chapter 4. Getting Financial Aid for Education** .....131

- A. **The Basics of Loans** .....131
  - Student Loans (Also Called Stafford and Perkins Loans) .....131
  - Parent Loans for Undergraduate Students (Also Called PLUS Loans) .....133



- Private Loans (Also Called Alternative Loans) .....133
- Loan Consolidation .....134
- B. **The Basics of Scholarships** .....135
- C. **Resources for Finding Financial Aid and Scholarships** .....136
- D. **A PASS Can Help Pay for School** .....137

**Chapter 5. Assistive Technology for Education and Work** .....139

- A. **What Is Assistive Technology?** .....139
- B. **Assistive Technology for Education** ...140
  - Assistive Technology and K–12 Students .....140
  - Assistive Technology and Postsecondary Students .....141
- C. **A Beginner’s Guide to Funding Assistive Technology** .....141
  - Preparing a Justification Statement ..142
  - Sources of Funding for Assistive Technology .....143
  - Additional Tips on Obtaining Funding for Assistive Technology ..145

<b>D. Resources to Help Locate and Fund</b>	
Assistive Technology	146
State Technology Assistance Projects	146
State Protection and Advocacy Agencies and Client Assistance Programs	146

**SECTION III: JUMPSTARTING  
YOUR CAREER . . . . .153**

<b>Chapter 6. Making A Good First Impression</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>A. Marketing Yourself and Your Talent</b>	<b>154</b>
Be Prepared	154
Present Yourself Well	155
Stand Out from the Crowd	155
Know Your Audience	156
<b>B. Résumé Basics</b>	<b>156</b>
Writing Your Résumé	156
Résumé Formats: Chronological or Functional	158
Tips for Performing Artists' Résumés	159
Tips for Visual Artists' Résumés	161
Tips for Literary Artists' Résumés	161
<b>C. Portfolio Basics</b>	<b>162</b>

<b>D. Interview Basics</b>	<b>162</b>
Tips for Successful Interviews	163
What Are Employers Looking For?	164
The Bottom Line for Interviews	165
<b>E. For People with Disabilities: Know Your Rights as an Interviewee</b>	<b>165</b>
<b>F. Cover Letters and Thank-You Notes</b>	<b>167</b>
Cover Letters	167
Thank-You Notes	167

<b>Chapter 7. Job Search Basics</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>A. Places to Begin Your Job Search</b>	<b>168</b>
<b>B. One-Stop Career Centers</b>	<b>168</b>
How to Access Your Local One-Stop Career Center	169
What Services Are Available?	170
<b>C. The Art of Networking</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>D. Employment and Temporary Agencies</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>E. Want Ads</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>F. Creating a One-of-a-Kind Position: The Employer Proposal</b>	<b>174</b>



**Chapter 8. The Self-Employment Option . .176**

- A. Exploring Self-Employment as an Option . . . . .176**
  - The First Steps Toward Self-Employment . . . . .178
  - Possible Barriers to Self-Employment for People with Disabilities . . . . .181
  - Tips on Preparing a Business Plan . . .182
- B. Resources for Self-Employed People and Entrepreneurs . . . . .184**

**Chapter 9. Mapping the Road to Success . .187**

- A. Launching a Successful Career in the Literary Arts . . . . .187**
  - Where to Start . . . . .187
  - Write Something! . . . . .188
  - Marketing Your Products . . . . .189
  - Internet Resources . . . . .190
  - Community Resources . . . . .191
- B. Launching a Successful Career in the Performing Arts: Acting . . . . .192**
  - A Hard Look at Reality . . . . .192
  - Advice on Getting Started . . . . .193
  - Talent Agents . . . . .193
  - Managers . . . . .196
  - Headshots . . . . .196

- Résumés . . . . .198
- Demo Videotapes and Audiotapes . . .199
- Postcards . . . . .199
- Your Appointment Book . . . . .199
- A Word on Bookkeeping . . . . .200
- Finding Work . . . . .200
- Tips for Successful Auditions . . . . .200
- Trade Papers and Talent Directories . .201
- Unions . . . . .201
- Your Rights as a Performer with a Disability . . . . .203
- Tips for a Successful Career . . . . .203
- Resources Specifically for Actors with a Disability . . . . .204
- Books on the Business of Acting . . . .204
- C. Launching a Successful Career as a Visual Artist . . . . .205**
  - Introduction: Why Do People Make Art? . . . . .205
  - Creating a Portfolio . . . . .206
  - Elements of a Portfolio . . . . .206
  - Showing and Selling Your Work: Why? Where? To Whom? . . . . .209
  - Fellowships, Residencies, and Grants .215
  - Taxes . . . . .215
  - The Web . . . . .216
  - Resources for Visual Artists . . . . .217
  - Useful Web Sites . . . . .218



**SECTION IV: SUCCESSFULLY  
NAVIGATING YOUR  
CHOSEN PATH . . . . .219**

**Chapter 10. Basic Benefit Issues  
for Artists with Disabilities . . . . .220**

**A. The Episodic Earner:  
A Brief Discussion . . . . .220**

**B. Health Insurance . . . . .221**  
 Tips on Finding Health  
 Insurance for Artists . . . . .221  
 Preliminary Health Insurance  
 Resources . . . . .223  
 National Associations That  
 Provide Health Insurance . . . . .223

**C. Social Security: Understanding  
SSI and SSDI . . . . .226**  
 How Does SSA Define Disability? . . .226  
 How can I contact SSA? . . . . .227  
 What Is SSDI? . . . . .227  
 How Is SSDI Funded? . . . . .227  
 How Much Can I Get from SSDI? . . .227  
 What Is SSI? . . . . .227  
 How Is SSI Funded? . . . . .228  
 How Much Can I Get from SSI? . . . .228

How Do SSI and SSDI Differ? . . . . .229  
 What Are the Average  
 Benefits Provided to Artists  
 with Disabilities by SSA? . . . . .229

**D. Understanding Work Incentives . . . . .229**

**E. Work Incentives That Apply to  
Both SSI and SSDI Recipients . . . . .231**  
 Impairment-Related Work  
 Expenses (IRWE) . . . . .231  
 Subsidies and Special Conditions . . .232  
 Unincurred Business Expenses  
 (Self-Employed Only) . . . . .232  
 Unsuccessful Work Attempts . . . . .233  
 Continued Payments under  
 an Approved Vocational  
 Rehabilitation Program . . . . .233

**F. Work Incentives for SSDI  
Recipients Only . . . . .234**  
 Trial Work Period . . . . .234  
 Extended Period of Eligibility . . . . .234  
 Continuation of Medicare  
 Coverage . . . . .234  
 Medicare for People with  
 Disabilities Who Work . . . . .234

**G. Work Incentives for SSI  
Recipients Only . . . . .235**  
 Earned Income Exclusion . . . . .235





Student Earned Income Exclusion . . .	235	How Will a Plan Affect Other	
Plan for Achieving Self-Support . . . .	236	Benefits I Get? . . . . .	243
Property Essential to Self-Support . . .	236	Are There Any Other Rules That	
Special SSI Payments for People		May Help? . . . . .	243
Who Work—Section 1619 (a) . . . .	237	PASS Experts . . . . .	243
Continued Medicaid Eligibility—		<b>I. The Ticket to Work and Work</b>	
Section 1619 (b) . . . . .	237	<b>Incentives Improvement Act of</b>	
Reinstating Eligibility without a		<b>1999 and You (TWWIAA) . . . . .</b>	<b>243</b>
New Application . . . . .	237	<b>J. Understanding Medicare . . . . .</b>	<b>244</b>
Blind Work Expenses . . . . .	237	How Is Medicare Different from	
<b>H. A Closer Look at PASS . . . . .</b>	<b>238</b>	Medicaid? . . . . .	244
Understanding PASS . . . . .	238	What Is Medicare? . . . . .	244
How Will a PASS Affect My		Who Is Eligible for Medicare	
SSI Checks? . . . . .	239	(Part A) Hospitalization	
Who Can Have a PASS? . . . . .	239	Insurance? . . . . .	245
What Kinds of Expenses Can a		Who Is Eligible for Medicare	
PASS Help Pay For? . . . . .	239	(Part B) Medical Insurance? . . . . .	246
How Do You Set Up a PASS? . . . . .	240	What If My Income Is	
Who May Help Me Set Up a Plan? . . .	240	Very Limited? . . . . .	246
How Do I Write a Plan? . . . . .	240	How Do I Sign Up for Medicare? . . .	247
What Does Social Security Do		What Does Medicare Cover? . . . . .	247
after I Submit My Plan? . . . . .	242	Examples of Hospital (Part A)	
What Happens If My Plan		Insurance Coverage . . . . .	248
Is Not Approved? . . . . .	242	Examples of Medicare (Part B)	
Can I Change My Plan after		Insurance Coverage . . . . .	248
It Is Approved? . . . . .	242	What Doesn't Medicare Cover? . . . . .	249
What Happens If I Cannot		What Are My Medicare Insurance	
Complete My Plan? . . . . .	242	Options? . . . . .	249



What You Should Know If You  
Have Other Health Insurance . . . . .250

**K. Understanding Medicaid . . . . .251**

What Is the Medicaid Program? . . . . .251  
How Is Medicaid Administered  
and Financed? . . . . .251  
Who Is Eligible for Medicaid? . . . . .252  
Why Does Medicaid Coverage Vary  
So Widely from State to State? . . . . .253  
What Services Does  
Medicaid Cover? . . . . .253  
How Do I Apply for Medicaid? . . . . .253

**Chapter 11. Working with Your  
New Employer . . . . .254**

**A. Understanding the Americans with  
Disabilities Act (ADA) . . . . .254**

Regulations and Publications  
Available by Fax on Demand . . . . .255  
Questions and Answers about Your  
Employment Rights as an  
Individual with a Disability . . . . .257  
Additional Resources about ADA  
Requirements Affecting  
Employment . . . . .263

**B. Accommodations for Work . . . . .264**

Understanding Reasonable  
Accommodations for Work . . . . .264  
Facts about Job Accommodations . . . . .265  
Sample Accommodations  
and Costs . . . . .265  
Writing a Job Accommodation  
Request Letter . . . . .266  
The Job Accommodation  
Network (JAN) . . . . .267

**C. Resources to Educate Your  
New Employer . . . . .268**

Everything You Always Wanted to  
Know about Working with  
Performers with Disabilities  
but Were Afraid to Ask . . . . .269  
Everything Production Needs to  
Know When a Performer  
with a Disability Is Hired . . . . .272  
Inappropriate Questions Potential  
Employers May Ask . . . . .275  
Books and Videotapes to Educate Your  
Employer . . . . .276



**APPENDICES: BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES FOR LITERARY, PERFORMING, AND VISUAL ARTISTS .....279**

- A. General Arts Organizations .....280
- B. Arts-Related Associations and Unions ..291
- C. Arts-Related Journals, Trades, and other Publications .....309
- D. Resources for People with Disabilities in the Arts .....315
- E. Internship Opportunities in the Arts ...325
- F. Funding Resources for Artists .....331
- G. State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies .....333
- H. State Technology Assistance Projects ..343
- I. State Client Assistance Programs and Protection and Advocacy Agencies for People with Disabilities ..... 353
- J. Job Search Resources ..... 378

**BIBLIOGRAPHY .....379**





# Foreword

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

## **A Message from Susan M. Daniels, Ph.D. Former Deputy Commissioner for Disability and Income Security Programs, Social Security Administration**

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, the 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 perform-

ing 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





# Introduction



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.

