**Employment Insights with the NRTC – Episode 4**

Opening music

Introduction: Welcome back to Employment Insights with the NRTC. On this episode, we are joined by guest, Quan Leysath, and our host, Sylvia Stinson-Perez. Continue listening to hear about Quan’s employment journey and how he gained professional development through volunteering for TASK and his journey on becoming a mentor for others.

Sylvia: Welcome, Quan. I am so excited to have you with us today. Quan, I have known each other for about five years and we were participating in a business training program together. And I was so impressed with Quan. And so, I've been able to watch his career over the past five or so years. And I just thought he would be an ideal guest for us to have on. So welcome, Quan.

Quan: Well, thank you so much. It's, it's a pleasure to being on. And I'd like to say that I was very impressed with you in the BMT program. This is a mentor mentee program. Therefore, I asked during that program for you to be my mentor. Yeah. So thank you so much for thinking about me.

Sylvia: Well, I can tell you and everyone, Quan that I've learned as much from you as you possibly could have learned from me. So, let’s start with you sharing a little bit about your vision loss journey.

Quan: So, yes, absolutely. So, my eye condition I have a macular degeneration. And what that is, is when your central vision deteriorates very quickly and over time, your peripheral vision deteriorates very slowly, but over time it does deteriorate. And to illustrate that, as a child, I was able to read regular prints. And throughout my lifetime I went from reading regular print to large print to then using a magnifier with a large print to then not even really being able to read print at all. But I still have some central, excuse me, some peripheral vision left.

Sylvia: Yeah and I'm sure that's pretty helpful for getting around to so.

Quan: Yes.

Sylvia: So, Quan, tell us about your work journey. You've had quite a few interesting jobs and so share that with us.

Quan: OK, well, I started out in the banking sector, in the private sector as a loan servicing specialist. Eventually I moved up to being a team leader for that for that team. I ended my, my career in the private sector as a underwriter assistant. The reason I left that, the private sector, is because I was facing a accessibility barrier. Our division was incorporating a new platform that wasn't accessible. So, from there, I moved on to work for the National Industries for the Blind, the central not for profit up in Alexandria, Virginia. While there, I worked as a price analyst. Eventually, I was promoted to Operation Support Manager, and then I was promoted again to a big supply center program manager. And then I thought about having this great idea of exploring something totally different. So, it's something totally new out of my wheelhouse. So, I applied and I get the opportunity to be a business development manager in a startup company, which is totally different from my previous experience. It was very exciting, very stressful, but had a lot of fun, learned a lot of things. But eventually it was time to have a more stable work life balance. And I moved on to being a contract manager at a not for profit that employs people who are blind and visually impaired. So that's where I'm at now.

Sylvia: Great, well that that is exciting, Quan. And you have had a journey and so. As we mentioned, I met you through a formal business training program, a leadership program. Share with us, and this was not required by your job, but share with us why you feel formal education, training programs and just even developing your personal professional skills are so important to your career success.

Quan: Absolutely. Why do I feel that? So, I came across a book and the title of that book is What Got You There- What Got You Here, Won't Get You There. And the contents of that book is really about changing your personal, personal behavior, therefore you can be more successful. But it was the title of that book that really, really stuck with me. It really told me all the talents, all the skills, all the knowledge that I had that got me into this whatever seat I was in at the time would not necessarily get me into that next seat. And what that title, what that statement does not say is that continuous self-improvement is required to get to the next seat. So, with our training program that we both participated in, I learned throughout that program different, different experiences, different knowledge and different, different areas of that I was lacking. It actually turned my perspective around in several different areas. I thought some departments were more. More, I guess, what would be the word? More of a luxury than a necessity, but through that program, I experienced situations and information that brought in my perspective, and I think when we're looking at formal programs in companies, training programs, certificate programs, even furthering your education outside of outside of training programs, I think that's something that everyone needs to sit back and look at, that this year is an opportunity for you to understand, sit down, your prejudices, your pre-prejudices, and really understand what's going on. I like to always tell a story about when I came in as a law specialist, my language was very, very direct. Here's the situation. Here's what, what I need. When can I get it from you? And over time, through training, through Toastmasters, through my BMT program, through even my MBA, just through having great mentors, I realized that that way of communicating is decent. It gets the job done. But how, how actively and how effectively have I benefited that relationship? Through that tone of communication and through these training programs, I definitely have improved on my communication skills, I'm able to collaborate and motivate and influence individuals much more effectively than I have in the past.

Sylvia: So, what really strikes me, Quan, from what you just were sharing, is that although the programs that you're talking about in many ways were very technical, skilled programs, they were about business skills.

Quan: Yes.

Sylvia: Yet the things you walked away in that you remember and that you grew in were soft skills like communications and relationship building and understanding the team and collaboration. So, I think that's fascinating. Of course, I know you developed the technical skills as well, but you also really developed the soft skills and recognize the need to. And sometimes it's even just that recognition that you need to is by participating in things outside of our box or that are not required are so important. I found this quote from this guy, Gregory Wade, and it says, “Every single opportunity we're presented with gives us an opportunity to learn, to grow, and to be inspired and to share that with others.” And I think that really exemplifies what you're saying there.

Quan: Yes, thank you, that was, was an amazing quote.

Sylvia: So, you have stepped up to take on new roles, you’ve volunteered for projects and something that I think having been in a career for a while, is that in the beginning and I know that I've talked to you about this, in the beginning you have to say yes to a lot of projects. And that is how you get a lot of skills. You go to other departments and you say, I want to learn. I want to grow my skills. I want to experience what this other part of the team does. So, share with us a little bit about that, because I think that is so critical is that sometimes we get stuck in. Well, I'm just going to stay over here in my little cubicle and do my job and I'm not going to float out there. And truly successful people have gone past those boundaries and they've, they've taken on other responsibilities. And I will say that the more experience you have, the less you have to do that. But in the beginning, you have to do that a lot and then you can be a lot more choosy as time goes by. And I'm not saying not to be choosy about taking on other responsibilities, but you will definitely have to say yes, a lot more. So, tell us your perspective on that, Quan.

Quan: Yes, I absolutely agree with that, that philosophy. And thank you so much for teaching me that philosophy. What, what happens that a lot of times is that as a as a newbie to the career, you come in and you say, well, this is my job duties and you want to master you want to do the best job you can because you don't want to be exited, you don't want to have that pink slip on your desk. Right? But what happens is that you're siloed. You don't understand what comes before your, before your process, and you don't understand what comes after your process. You don't understand how your work impacts others and what happens when you start reaching out and start saying yes to those projects? One, you are going to make friends. You're going to make, meet colleagues. You're going to get exposed to opportunities and knowledge that you wouldn't have been exposed to if you're just sitting there with your head down, getting your work done. And what that ultimately does is it makes you more valuable in your position as an individual. So now that you know what Division A, B and C does and how your division affects that, you're more knowledgeable when it comes to if you need to if you need to improve your process If there's a gap out there and you can see a solution for it. Well, if I do A at this point in a process, then y’all don't need to worry about that. It’s taking care of shrink. That is so, so important. Additionally, when it comes to networking, when it comes to building your circle of friends and your circle of colleagues, find those individuals in different departments that you can reach out to and have them as a source. Actually, before this, this podcast here, I called one of my previous, previous colleagues in another department and I said, hey, you know, I just had a had a rough hour and 15-minute call, want to bounce this off you. If you can provide any other insight into what am I experiencing, you know, let me know. And lo and behold, three years ago, he was dealing with the same situation, same department, just a different person in that department. And he, he provided guidance on where he went right at, what he failed at and some suggestions for me to help me move forward. He asked me some questions and some favors. And I said, hey, this is where I’m at with his favors. And he's like, hey, whenever you deliver for me, I would truly appreciate it because I need it over here. So, it's so important to say yes at the beginning, I fully agree.

Sylvia: That's awesome. So, let's switch gears a little bit to mentors, because you might not have recognized that as a mentor moment, but that was such a mentor moment. And we can have formal mentors who are people who we have an arrangement with that you maybe meet with on a regular basis, or your company might have a mentor program where they assign someone to you. But more often is that we have these amazing people who are those informal mentors those people that are our go to people who we know maybe they've had a similar experience or they're just trusted people who we can get some guidance from. And a mentor doesn't tell you what to do. We know that's what I found this awesome quote from Denzel Washington “Show me a successful individual. And I'll show you someone who had real positive influences in his or her life. I don't care what you do for a living if you do it well, I'm sure there was someone cheering you on or showing you the way. A mentor.” So, Quan, you've sought out mentors in your life. How do you find mentors, use mentors effectively, and what positive impact have mentors had in your career and in your life? So how do you find them? How do you effectively use them? And then what's been that positive impact for you?

Quan: Well, I would not be where I'm at today without the people who've taken the time to pour their wisdom into me. I'm a hard worker. I'm a go getter. But I wouldn't be where I'm at today without my mentors. How do I go about seeking, seeking out mentors? Well, I do a lot of self-reflection. I realize and identify opportunities for growth for myself, and I seek that out in other individuals, if, if I see Person A that's great at collaborating, I'm going to reach out to that person and say, hey, this is my career goal this is where I want to be, I see that collaborating is, is huge for this position. I am, I'm at the bottom. I'm a zero when it comes to understanding and being effective at collaborating. How can I move from being where I'm at now to where I need to be? And that person is typically willing to just pour their experiences in their thoughts and even there, if they see roadblocks, hey, you're going to run into this roadblock. And this is a suggestion on how to handle it. I’m not going to tell you how to handle it. But here's a suggestion on how to get around this roadblock. And as you said, that cheerleader. Additionally, some mentors even act as well, what I call sponsors and a sponsor is a whole nother different level. There's someone that was willing to spend political capital, you know, to leverage their either their position or favor to get you in a position, get you into a conversation, get you into a room which would expose you to things that to a situation that you never would have been exposed to. And those individuals I give I, I really, I'm really thankful for my mentors and I'm totally gracious and thankful for my, for my sponsors that I think as my mentors also.

Sylvia: That's awesome. So, another good quote, “A mentor is a brain to pick, an ear to listen and a push in the right direction.”

Quan: Absolutely

Sylvia: And that was a John C. Crosby quote, but I love that because it's so true with sometimes a mentor just gives you that push you need.

Quan: Yeah, and the mentor is able to hold you accountable.

Sylvia: So, Benjamin Disraeli said, “The greatest good you can do for another is not to just share your riches, but to reveal to another person his own.” So, helping people see their capabilities, their talents, because a lot of times we underestimate our own abilities and our own potential in many ways. And so, someone to line up behind you and say you can do this is so important. But then to also say, how can I help you achieve this? So, Quan, what are the blindness skills that have helped you in your career journey? What what's really important? What are some really important skills that someone has to have?

Quan: Wow, let's see here. I will start off with the first line of skill I obtained was mobility, the ability to walk by myself, get from point A to point B. The ability to think on my feet and be flexible. Like if I run into a situation where they have road construction, I'm able to reroute myself and in a safe way, of course, but still get to that location on time. That is major when you're talking to someone in an interview space and you're they're asking you, OK, well, not to be not to be a jerk or anything, but how are you going to get to work when I, when I hire you? And if you're able to say, hey, well, look, I'm going to walk out my door, I'm going to walk to the bus stop, I'm going to get on the 715-bus stop, and I'm going to ride that bus until I get to whatever stop. And what I'm going to do after that, I going to get off. I would cross the road, walk three blocks, I'm going take a left and I'm going to walk into the office and I’m going to make my way to my desk. I mean, when you say that with confidence, that changes the whole game. I mean, because many of the many of the hiring managers have not met a blind person before. So, they're understanding, understanding of a person's capability is really it’s lacking, it’s lacking in the sense of they're just not informed. Right?

Sylvia: Yep.

Quan: The second skill, I would say, is the technical skills. So, I'm a Jaws user. And as a as when I came into using Jaws, a lot of things were accessible. When I got my first job at, at the banking industry, everything was accessible, right? When I was pushing to move into that team lead space and to that assistant underwriter space, 50 to 70 percent of things were not accessible for the job. But through my Jaws knowledge, through understanding, understanding other tools that are out there to my, for my use, I was able to adapt and make those things, make that job or make that experience accessible for myself.

Sylvia: Right. So, my next question is about the soft skills, and you’ve just mentioned a couple being a problem solver, being confident. So, share with us the soft skills that are so critical for success.

Quan: I'm definitely always I would say problem solving, being able to advocate, so that kind of goes for that communication skills because you have to communicate to the right audience, to their to the right audience in the right tone. Yes, you can you can vent to your friends about accessibility. But let's go with the solution, when you go to a person and, you’re, you’re boss with a disability issue, right? Additionally, things that have made me successful, I would say listening, listening for what is being said and what is not being said. And I followed that up with asking good questions and of course, doing my own research.

Sylvia: Well, I'm going to say that I like that you mentioned explaining with confidence how you were going to do something, how you were going to get to work, how you were going to use technology. We think that's part of self-advocacy is being able to say it with confidence. And you said that makes all the difference. And I think that's so, so true.

Quan: Yes, it is saying with confidence, it's something that you pick up and so it's not something that you pick up just observing life, you know, somebody can say the sky is red and that means nothing to a blind person, right? But if they say it enough with confidence, people around them are looking like, OK, what part of the sky is red that they're talking about there? Obviously, he sees it and I'm not seeing it. Let me let me check my glasses here. It, the person could be totally wrong. They're saying it with confidence. Therefore, they're influencing others around them to believe that he's seeing red.

Sylvia: And to just go with that is that when you say I can do this job, I know one hundred percent I can. And here's how I'm going to do it. Here's how I'm going to get here. Here's how I’m going to do the job. It speaks volumes, truly does. So, Quan, can you provide just one major insight that you would give to someone who's coming into a career, making a career transition, maybe because they've experienced vision loss, just something that you think is so important for people to really understand that are new to blindness or just new to a job.

Quan: Oh, wow.

Sylvia: That can really help them.

Quan: And if I can, I can give two pieces of advice.

Sylvia: You can give two.

Quan: OK, so there's in that, in that area, that space where you're looking at applying for jobs, like getting that first job or you're in that gap between two careers. Right. My advice is perseverance, because you're going to hear and receive a lot of no's and eventually you know that may start wearing you down. But just remind yourself you're looking for that one yes. And that's all you really need. That one person, that one organization says, all right, let's do it. Let's go out there. We’ll figure it out on our way. Let's make this work. So, for those individuals in that gap year, I would say just be persistent there. For those individuals who are entering their career or they are entering a new career from the gap year, I would say for those individuals practice continuous improvement that will serve you well in so many ways. When you're walking into a new career, so you need to learn, right? You need to learn what you're doing, what everyone else is doing around you. But also, you're as you improve on your communication, your knowledge about the industry, you're just going to get better, continue networking, continuing asking for great advice. Self-learning, self-improvement also, but just self-improvement there. Continue self-learning.

Sylvia: continue continuous self-learning because being a lifelong learner is really just it's something that's essential, essential because, well, number one, you never know when you're going to have a job change, a career change, a life change. You just never know. But also, if there's one thing we've learned is that you never know when things on your job are going to change. So, it just always being working on skills. So, one thing that occurs to me that as well as you were talking is that someone who is maybe new to vision loss or learning the skills they might go through, a lot of technology training, go to orientation and mobility skills training, do even do independent living skills training. And then they go home and they don't have a job yet. Yet, they don't continue to work on those skills. And if we don't use those skills, they get rusty. So, you've got to get out even if you have really, quote, nowhere to go. Well you need to go out and volunteer. You need to go out, walk the neighborhood, take the bus, use the paratransit, use the ride share, whatever it is you're going to use to get to work eventually you need to go out there and practice using that. Take that as an opportunity to practice and build those skills. And it takes years to become a really good traveler, a really good cane user, etc. So that's an opportunity to practice, practice those technology skills. Get on there write resumes, get on the Internet, look for jobs. Don't wait for someone else to do that for you. Make sure you're working on building those skills, because I find the more I use the computer, the more problems happen. So, the more I have to be a problem solver. It's so annoying. But it’s so true. But if I just let it sit, which one day when I retire, I literally am like, I don't want to see a computer again when I retire. But it's so true that the more we use it, the better you become a problem solver in the technology world. So, but if you're not using it, the same with your independent living skills. If you want to be a safe cook, you've got to actually cook. So, practicing all of those skills, even if you, quote, don't think you need them at the moment, you do because you need to build them.

Quan: Yeah.

Sylvia: So important. I love that persistence and lifelong learning. Great insights.

Quan: Oh, and can I add one more thing?

Sylvia: You want to add one more.

Quan: Well, you, you brought it up. When you used the word opportunity and volunteering, that is so important because you're able to utilize those skills in the volunteering, you're able to keep sharpening your toolset, right? And I would tell you this, nobody volunteers to turn down free labor, even if they had no, no understanding about what a blind person can do. If you walk up to them and say, hey, I will start doing this research for you for free, I will start typing your memos up for you for free, just give me an opportunity. Yeah. You are going to get somebody who says, absolutely, let's try. Let's see if this works. So, yeah, just wanted to kind of mention that.

Sylvia: And, you know, so Quan something else to say about that is sometimes, you know, people I've heard people say in my many years in this field, well, I'm not going to work for free. Well, you know that is technically you're not getting a paycheck, but you're getting a lot of experience.

Quan: Yes.

Sylvia: And truly successful people often volunteer outside of even their career, and I know you and I both volunteer, we have successful careers, but we also volunteer and my volunteer work has nothing to do with what I do as a for a job, nothing to do with it, and it is actually hard work labor. So, but I am learning stuff there. I'm networking. I’m socializing and it's just a good it's a good thing to do. So, don't think of it as quote, free labor. Think of it as an opportunity to learn, to grow, to network because you just never know. This has been a fantastic conversation. So, I'm going to ask you one more question. What is one quote, life motto, saying that has really that you live by? Like, this is like who I am. It drives me.

Quan: Ah. Zig Ziegler said something to the fact that I'll probably totally mess it up, right?

Sylvia: That’s ok.

Quan: It is something to the fact that, “Success, success only comes when preparation meets opportunity.” I think that's what it was. And, you know, I, I break that down on so many different levels, but that the preparation piece there, you know, that continuous learning that equates to continuous learning for myself. And then, opportunity. I mean, yes, a beautiful opportunity can come up, but if you're not prepared for it and it's just going to pass you by. So, yeah, I live by that quote. Just always continue improving, preparing for opportunities that may come that I expect to come. And then if something out of the blue comes up then, hey, if I'm prepared for it, then I'm going go after it.

Sylvia: So, Quan.

Quan: Yeah.

Sylvia: I know that you said you've benefited from mentoring, but now you are a mentor for people and you've even started a mentoring program where you work. Share with us a little bit about that and why you did it. And, you know, what's what what's that impact for you?

Quan: Absolutely. So, something one of my mentors drilled into me is that people have a lot of potential. And if you tap into their potential, you not only better them as individual, you better whoever they help and in the future. Right? So, when I came at my organization I'm currently at, I’ve seen a lot of just a lot of potential around me and, you know, on the side as a side thing, I was sending people classes and, hey, you know, let's have a conversation during our lunch time. And this got pushed up to it was supposed to be a negative thing, right? It got pushed up to the executive team that “Quan is taking time during his lunch talking to people about whatever.” And the leadership, senior leadership looked at as like, OK, well, hey, let's, let's put him in charge of this mentor program that we've been thinking about doing. So, when the idea was proposed to me like, hey, we already know that you're mentoring and they just put it out there. All the people I was mentoring on the side, that I just came in contact with and they're like, how about let's do a formal mentoring program? So earlier this year, I got a team together and we designed a formal mentoring program. And during the summer we actually kicked it off. So, we had 10 mentors, 10 mentees, some that we went out and recruited, recruited some mentors. And when I recruited some mentees, because just with our communication, our structure, we wanted to make sure that individuals who would benefit from this type of structured program would actually apply for the program. So, we set it up, we connected them. We set up a structure in which we designed a framework not to not a curriculum in which to control their interactions, but a framework, framework in which they could benefit for their interactions. And we, for, we wanted to start off with the 12-month program, but we said, hey, we'll, we'll start it for the six-month program, only to understand what we did correctly and what we did well and then take a lot of feedback from, from the experience and then improve on that. And then we'll for our next session, we'll push a nine to 12-month program out there. But it's been a excellent experience building a program and then also kind of managing the program now. It, it has not taken away from my mentoring responsibilities still during my lunch time, still call, check on my mentees, see how they're doing and see, see what the environment's like. Just listening to their tone, checking to see if they're feeling nervous, feeling tired. So, I give that word of encouragement, some other mentees I have to encourage and hold them accountable for, for not moving forward in their goals, in their professional development, because sometimes we all need that that push and that sense of somebody is watching me and somebody watching me that cares about my my future. So, they're only asking me to do this and ask me to do what I said I was going to do, because they, they know it benefits myself. Right? So, it involves all that. And I really do appreciate the time that I have to participate in as a as a mentor and also as creating this program to help other people get mentored.

Sylvia: And beyond the benefit to others and to you personally, you've had a career advantage as well because management saw, recognized and acted on that and you never know where that is going to lead.

Quan: Yes.

Sylvia: Great job.

Quan: Thank you.

Sylvia: That's brilliant. Brilliant, Quan. And I know that to be so true about you, I value as you as a friend. And just so thank you so much for being here. So, I'm going to leave with this great quote that I have loved being a mentor for you. But as I said, I have learned as much from you as you could have possibly learned from me. But I love this Whoopi Goldberg quote. And I mean, I've known this one for a little while. “We're here for a reason. I, I believe a bit of the reason is to throw little torches out, to lead people through the dark.” And that to me that represents mentoring. And so, thank you so much for being here and sharing your brilliant insights in your journey with us. You are fantastic.

Quan: Thank you so much for having me.

Closing music