

Competitive Employment: Has it Become the “First Choice” Yet?

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This paper addresses the question: In 2002 related to day services, work and employment, is competitive employment the first choice for individuals with significant disabilities? The decade of the 1990s was marked by the passage of the American’s with Disabilities Act, the Olmstead decision and its emphasis on full community integration for individuals with significant disabilities, and the blending of individualized support strategies with the philosophy of self determination. Despite these and many other important accomplishments and initiatives, the fact remains that competitive employment is not the first choice for the vast majority of individuals with significant disabilities. Also, the measures used to define quality supported employment outcomes and programs frequently lack clarity. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is two fold. First, it briefly discusses the underlying values that need to guide all competitive employment programs designed to support individuals with disabilities to obtain careers. Second, it details benchmark indicators through which the quality of supported employment programs should be measured. The paper concludes with the description of a paradigm shift that will truly move center based day program services to workplace supports in competitive employment.

It has been almost two decades since the initial published reports began to appear on supported employment as a means to assist people with significant disabilities become competitively employed. During these past 20 years, we have learned a great deal about what works in supported employment and what does not work (Mank, Cioffi & Yovanoff, 1997, 2000). We have also learned that there are many challenging implementation issues, as well as persistent philosophical differences, that have created major barriers to full implementation. We have seen greater amounts of deinstitutionalization (Hayden & Albery, 1994), the closing of state institutions (Stancliffe & Lakin, 1999), the downsizing of sheltered workshops and the selective reallocation of funds targeted from segregated programs to integrated programs (Murphy, Rogan, Handley, Kincaid, & Royce-Davis, 2002), and a more significant voice given to people with disabilities via the statutes and the advocacy movement (Wehmeyer & Lawrence, 1995). We have seen changes in the way that individuals with mental retardation are classified by the American Association on Mental Retardation (Luckasson, Coulter, Polloway, Reiss, Schalock, Snell, Spitalnik, & Stark, 1992), with a movement away from intelligent quotient labels that are derived from tests and a movement towards a description of the supports, both level and intensity, that are required by persons with cognitive disabilities (AAMR, 2002). In fact, the “hot” term for the 1980’s was supports, and this terminology has been further strengthened through the new “hot term” of self-determination. The implicit power of supported employment, supported education or supported living, when intertwined with the philosophical depth of self-determination and free choice, is a powerful means of marrying supports as the programmatic strategy with self-determination as the philosophical foundation.

What have we learned over the past 20 years? The demystification of disability is the most significant contribution generated through the evolution of supported employment and other programs that define themselves in a context of supports. Too often and with too many people in our society, perceptions related to disability are immediately linked to descriptors such as handicapped, impairment, unable to do, dependent, and less qualified. The gift of supported employment is its focus on the abilities of individuals with disabilities to be valued and productive at the workplace. Supported employment reduces the impact of disability, even if it is only during the time frame that the individual is at work for eight hours. Once that individual departs the workplace, she or he may well be forced into "putting back on" their physical disability or mental retardation label because needed supports are not present at home or other places in the community.

For example, consider Roseanne, a woman with a significant physical disability and also a cognitive disability. Roseanne has very limited speech and requires some personal assistance services throughout the day. When Roseanne works at the Wal Mart Department Store placing security scanners on the CDS in the electronics department, she earns \$7.20 an hour, receives health benefits, and participates in the profit sharing plan. With supports at work, Roseanne reduces or neutralizes the effects of her disability label. She, in fact, is not disabled at all during the work day. In the eyes of her coworkers and manager as she performs her job duties, she is not disabled because they are depending on her to complete her work assignments. However, once her work shift ends, she is totally dependent on and at the mercy of the local transit systems that serves people with physical disabilities. Once Roseanne wheels out of the Wal Mart Department Store, she must again "put on her label" and be dependent. The more the concepts of supports can permeate not only the human service system, but also communities and society as a whole, the more individuals with disabilities such as Rosanne will become infused into the mainstream of daily life in the community.

Many professionals have worked in the disability field for a long time. Their respective fields may be special education, rehabilitation, advocacy services, administration, psychology, or occupational therapy. The specific field really doesn't matter. What does matter is that all of us are vulnerable to a disability or an injury at any point in time. Many of us experience permanent injury, chronic illness or disability, or we live with loved ones who do. Disability, particularly significant disability, is the great equalizer across gender, race, and socioeconomic status. The quickest road to humility is to experience significant disability. The quickest road out of significant disability is to experience supports from family, friends, and competent professionals who know how to interact with people in a dignified, non-patronizing way.

When we review the progress made in supported employment over the last two decades, we must always return to our core values. These core values have not only defined supported employment, they have also created the substantial spillover effect of supports equaling reduction of disability. No one is independent. We are all interdependent (Condeluci, 1991). The concept of true independence does not truly exist. We may all feel that we are completely independent at one time or another in our life, but invariably we will need others to help combat the physical, emotional, and intellectual disabilities that crowd into our lives. Understanding that we are all interdependent helps pave the way for understanding the role and impact of supports in designing systems aimed at elevating people to a higher level.

The core values that have permeated supported employment are: inclusion; informed choice; career path; parity in wages, hours of employment, and benefits; parity in work style options and choices; and the opportunity to

be employed in the quickest, most efficient manner possible. These core values are in stark opposition to the opportunities available to an individual with a significant disability being limited to participating in segregated day programs and living in a nursing home or other congregate settings.

When we examine where we are in 2002 related to day services, work, and employment, we must ask: Is competitive employment the first choice for people with significant disabilities? Sadly, the answer is no. While many segregated day activities may be well meant, they are inconsistent with independence and community inclusion, (Wehman, 2001). The time is long overdue to cease segregated program services and to expand competitive employment opportunities. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is two fold. First, it will briefly discuss the underlying values that need to be in all competitive employment programs assisting individuals with a disability. Second, it will look at the benchmark indicators through which the quality of supported employment programs should be measured.

Supported Employment: Growth, Implementation, and Values

Within less than a decade, the national number of people participating in supported employment in the U.S. increased from 9,800 to over 140,000 (Wehman, Revell, Kregel, 1998). McGaughey and her colleagues (1994) report that approximately 18% of all individuals with developmental disabilities in adult day programs participate in integrated employment. Historically, these are individuals who were confined to adult activity centers, sheltered workshops, nursing homes, and institutions. Competitive employment was not likely to be in their futures as long as they participated in segregated employment. The use of trained employment specialists, informed coworkers, mentors, and technological supports, together with enlightened legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), have greatly enhanced the employment possibilities for people with significant disabilities.

Movement from Segregated to Integrated Employment Outcomes

A recent policy change by a major federal employment service funding agency is a critically important example of the movement towards increasing opportunities for achievement of competitive employment outcomes by people with a significant disability. On January 22, 2001, the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Education amended the regulations governing the State Vocational Rehabilitation Program to redefine the term *employment outcome* to mean *an individual with a disability working in an integrated setting* (Federal Register, January 22, 2001). For decades with State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), extended employment (sometimes referred to as non-integrated or sheltered employment) was an approved potential employment outcome for individuals with a disability who received VR services. Because extended/sheltered employment utilizes non-integrated work settings, the redefining of an employment outcome for a VR participant to mean 'work in an integrated setting' removes extended/sheltered employment as an approved potential employment outcome for Vocational Rehabilitation services.

The purpose of the Vocational Rehabilitation program, as stated in The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, is to enable individuals with a disability to achieve an employment outcome in an integrated setting (Federal Register, January 22, 2001). In response to the priority on employment outcomes in integrated settings, first highlighted in the

1992 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the decade of the 1990s was marked by a continual decrease in the use of the sheltered employment as an employment outcome by Vocational Rehabilitation agencies. For example, VR agencies nationally closed 11,605 in sheltered employment in Fiscal Year (FY) 1990; by FY 1998, the number of sheltered employment VR closures dropped 34% to 7,633. In contrast, the number of individuals closed by VR in supported employment, an employment outcome marked by the use of integrated work settings, rose steadily during the 1990s. For example, VR closed approximately 9,528 individuals in supported employment in FY 1991, 13,950 in FY 1994, and 23,056 in FY 1998 (Rehabilitation Services Administration, 2001).

Wage opportunities are a key factor in the movement by VR away from sheltered employment to more integrated employment outcomes. The average wage for individuals closed in sheltered employment by VR in FY 98 was \$2.54 per hour and \$64.51 per week; the corresponding wage information for persons closed by VR in supported employment during the same time period was \$5.88 per hour and \$142.93 per week. These wage differences are consistent across various disability groupings. For example, individuals with a primary disability classification of moderate mental retardation closed in sheltered employment by VR in FY 98 earned on average \$2.04 per hour and \$50.71 per week; the corresponding wage information for persons in this disability classification closed by VR in supported employment during the same time period was \$5.24 per hour and \$112.09 per week (Rehabilitation Services Administration, 2001). The Federal minimum wage increased from \$4.75 to \$5.15 per hour as of September 1, 1997, one month before the start of federal FY 1998.

The growth of competitive employment outcomes over the last decade through use of supported employment is an important milestone in the movement, fostered by the American's With Disabilities Act (ADA), to full community integration of people with a disability at work and elsewhere in their lives (Wehman, 1993). The ADA was the reason the Supreme Court upheld the Olmstead case (Olmstead v. L.C., 1999; Legal Information Institute, 2002), a major community integration landmark decision. However, the actual impact of this growth in competitive employment outcomes is relatively small in terms of the full array of programs serving people with disabilities in non-integrated settings. For example, the recent publication, The State of the States in Developmental Disabilities: 2002 Study Summary (Braddock Hemp, Parish, & Rizzolo, 2002), reports that in FY 2000, state Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities agencies served approximately 361,000 individuals in day, work, and sheltered employment programs that did not involve supported/competitive employment. In comparison, approximately 108,000 persons were served by these agencies in supported/competitive employment, an approximate 3:1 ratio of non-competitive to competitive work outcomes for persons served by MR/DD agencies. Although this FY 2000 23% participation rate in supported/competitive employment is an improvement over the corresponding 17% rate found for FY 1998 (Braddock et al, 2000), it is clear that non-competitive employment settings still dominate state Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities service systems.

For individuals served through the Medicaid Home and Community Based Waiver, another recent report (West, et al, 2002) indicated that in FY 1999, only about 15% of the more than 130,000 persons receiving day habilitation services through the HCB Waiver were in supported employment. The rest were in a variety of day habilitation service categories that were not competitive work oriented and frequently not community integrated. These reports dramatically demonstrate that for many people with significant disabilities, being served in non-integrated settings continues to be the dominant experience. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities still remain left behind in segregated centers. Many more are on waiting lists for employment despite the

fact that people with significant cognitive, physical, and behavioral challenges have demonstrated their competence in the workplace.

Core Values Underlying Supported Employment

Increasingly, most agree on the benefits of individuals with significant disabilities having opportunities for real, integrated work as a primary option. All parties involved benefit from competitive employment. Such employment provides the individual with a disability a real job, benefits, and the dignity that arises from gainful employment. The employer gets a good worker and receives specialized support to train and maintain the individual. The family is able to see its family member in a fully competent role in the workplace. Finally, taxpayers spend less money than they would to support the individual in a segregated day program year-in and year-out. However, several questions remain: Why do the vast majority of individuals with mental and physical disabilities remain in segregated day programs? What values are service providers and advocates following? And what are the indicators that best reflect quality employment outcomes?

The answers to these questions lie partially in the inability of advocates and people with disabilities to adequately marshal their collective efforts to increase work opportunities (Wehman & Kregel, 1995). The adult service systems in the world remain deeply entrenched, as they have been for several decades (Albin, Rhodes & Mank, 1994). Changing this way of providing services is extremely difficult, particularly in times of reduced funding resulting from a recessionary economy. Hence, there is an overwhelming necessity to market the positive attributes of supported employment for people with significant disabilities. Table 1 on the following page lists nine values that have guided supported employment efforts from the early 1980's and provides a brief description of each.

These values reflect the themes discussed earlier at the beginning of this paper and have been increasingly reflected in rehabilitation legislation, as well as the Olmsted decision. Presumption of employment, person centered control, wages, supports, interdependence and connecting within the community: These are the underlying values that are reflected in an excellent employment program. Without these values, a program has no beacon to follow in its daily operations. Without these values, a program will wander from funding source to funding source, dependent on the current fad or whim of the moment. Without clear values, a program will dilute its efforts and lose focus.

Yet the question remains: How do values become translated into real operational quality indicators for programs to guide themselves? What are these benchmarks by which program staff, consumers, and advocates can discern the value of one program over another? These questions take on special merit when one considers, for example, the emergence of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentive Improvement Act (TWWIIA) of 1999, (Public Law (106-170), a program intended to financially empower individuals who receive Social Security Disability Benefits to utilize funding from the Social Security Administration to select their own employment program and pay for needed services and supports. What are the core indicators of quality competitive employment services that can be used by an individual with a disability holding a Ticket to Work, a funding agency seeking to positive employment outcomes for the dollars spent on services, and an employment service agency seeking to measure the effectiveness and improve its services? What follows is a description of 10 quality indicators that can be utilized in assessing the quality of a supported employment program.

Table 1 -- Supported Employment Values

Values	Values Clarification
Presumption of Employment	A conviction that everyone, regardless of the level or the type of disability, has the capability and right to a job.
Competitive Employment	A conviction that employment occurs within the local labor market in regular community businesses.
Control	A conviction that when people with disabilities choose and regulate their own employment supports and services, career satisfaction will result.
Commensurate Wages and Benefits	A conviction that people with disabilities should earn wages and benefits equal to that of coworkers performing the same or similar jobs.
Focus on Capacity and Capabilities	A conviction that people with disabilities should be viewed in terms of their abilities, strengths, and interests rather than their disabilities.
Importance of Relationships	A conviction that community relationships both at, and away from work leads to mutual respect and acceptance.
Power of Supports	A conviction that people with disabilities need to determine their personal goals and receive assistance in assembling the supports necessary to achieve their ambitions.
Systems Change	A conviction that traditional systems must be changed to ensure customer control which is vital to the integrity of supported employment.
Importance of Community	A conviction that people need to be connected to the formal and informal networks of a community for acceptance, growth, and development.

Quality Indicators for Supported Employment Programs

The goal of supported employment programs is to assist people with the most significant disabilities be successful in paid employment in the integrated work setting of their choice. However, what exactly is the functional meaning of the term *paid employment in an integrated setting*? Current federal regulations, issued by the Rehabilitation Services Administration to govern the national Vocational Rehabilitation Program, define integrated setting as being a setting typically found in the community where individuals with a disability interact with non-disabled individuals, other than non-disabled individuals who are providing services to the individuals with a disability, to the same extent that non-disabled individuals in comparable positions interact with other persons (Federal Register, January 17, 2001).

The general wording in this regulation of the terms “setting typically found in the community” and “interact with non-disabled individuals to the same extent as non-disabled persons in comparable positions” allows for various

interpretations on what actually constitutes paid employment in an integrated setting. Therefore, jobs can be considered competitive employment where the singular measure of integration being applied is the presence of co-workers who are not disabled without consideration of other key measures of settings typically found in the community. As a result, Vocational Rehabilitation and other supported employment funding agencies, providers of employment services, and individuals with disabilities served by supported employment programs are uncertain over just what is meant by an outcome to supported employment services generally characterized as paid employment in an integrated work settings. It is clear that the uncertainty surrounding both the regulatory meaning and community level application of the term *paid employment in an integrated setting* severely compromises the usefulness of general references to "paid employment" and "an integrated setting" as measures of the quality of an employment outcome. Clearly defined, carefully described core indicators of the quality of supported employment programs are needed. Table 2 on the following page contains 10 quality indicators that can serve as effective measure of the quality of a supported employment program.

These 10 indicators address quality of a supported employment program from a variety of critical perspectives. The first perspective is the point of view of individuals with a disability who turn to a supported employment program for support in getting and retaining a job. Do individuals served by the supported employment program consistently achieve truly meaningful job outcomes? Who selects these jobs and do these employment opportunities reflect informed customer choice and control? The indicators must also reflect the perspective of employers. Are employers satisfied with the work produced by the individuals in supported employment and the quality of the ongoing support services received from the supported employment program? The indicators must be responsive to the agencies funding the supported employment program. Does the provider have a well coordinated job retention support system in place and does the program's management information system accurately track and monitor employment outcomes? Finally, the combined set of indicators must serve as a means for self-assessment by the supported employment program itself to help identify areas of strength that can be used in marketing and areas that need priority attention for improvement.

In the discussion that follows, each of the 10 indicators recommended in Table 2 is described in terms of its importance as a quality measure for a supported employment program. Probe questions are also provided that define the key features of each indicator.

Quality Indicator #1: Meaningful Competitive Employment in Integrated Work Settings

An individual in supported employment works in a competitive job in an integrated work setting. What in fact characterizes the true quality of competitive work in an integrated setting? The preamble to the 1997 Vocational Rehabilitation regulatory announcement frames paid employment in integrated settings in the context of the *parity principle* by asking the question: Is the experience of the person with a disability at parity with the experiences of the non disabled co-worker (Federal Register, February 11, 1997)? The importance of this parity principle is supported by the research by Mank and his associates on the positive relations of typical employment features and coworker involvement with higher wage and integration outcomes for individuals in supported employment (Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1997, 1999, 2000). Consideration of the parity of experiences between the worker with a disability and the non-disabled co-worker leads directly to the following questions as functional indicators of the quality of the paid employment outcome:

Table 2 -- Quality Indicators for Supported Employment Pro-

Quality Indicators	Example Functional Measures for Indicator
Meaningful Competitive Employment in Integrated Work Settings	Employee with a disability is hired, supervised, and paid directly by business where job setting is located; receives wages/benefits commensurate with non-disabled coworkers.
Informed Choice, Control, and Satisfaction	Employee selects own service provider and job coach; selects job and work conditions; is satisfied with job and supports.
Level and Nature of Supports	Program is skilled in identifying workplace support options and developing workplace support options.
Employment of Individuals with Truly Significant Disabilities	Program is serving individuals whose intermittent competitive work history, disability profile, functional capabilities, and other barriers to employment are truly reflective of people who need ongoing workplace supports to retain employment.
Amount of Hours Worked Weekly	Program is achieving employment outcomes at 30 or more hours per week consistently. Individuals receiving support are satisfied with their hours of competitive employment.
Number of Persons from Program Working Regularly	Program currently has a majority of its participants working in competitive employment. Individuals receiving support are satisfied with their hours of competitive employment.
Well Coordinated Job Retention System	Program maintains regular contact with its employed customers to monitor job stability and can respond effectively to both planned and unplanned job retention support needs. Program replaces individuals who do not retain employment.
Employment Outcome Monitoring and Tracking System	Program maintains an information system that provides information readily to its customers on employment status, longevity, wages, benefits, hours of employment, and jobs.
Maximizing Integration and Community Participation	Employees with a disability work in jobs where the work environment facilitates physical and social interaction with coworkers. Employees are satisfied with the quality of their work and community integration.
Employer Satisfaction	Program viewed as an employment service agency rather than a human service provider. Employers are seen as a customer of the service, and the program designs policy and procedure that are responsive to the business community

- How is the person with a disability hired? Is s/he hired by the business where the work is being performed or is s/he an employee of an employment services organization?
- How is the person with a disability supervised? Is s/he supervised by an employee of the business where the work is being performed or by an employee of an employment service organization?

(continued)

- Is the individual with a disability paid comparable wages and benefits to co-workers who are not disabled?
- Does the employee with a disability have the same career advancement opportunities within the worksite as co-workers who are not disabled, as well as having equal access to resources at the work place such as Employee Assistance Programs?
- Is there full social access to co-workers who are not disabled and is there an absence of a congregation of persons with disabilities within the work site?

The goal of supported employment was never to simply find jobs for persons with significant disabilities. Rather, the focus of quality supported employment dictates that services result in meaningful employment outcomes for customers. A meaningful employment outcome is a job with career possibilities. A worker at a job site who is actually the employee of an outside service provider has limited career opportunities. Most people with disabilities are not interested in dead-end positions. As with other members of the labor force, people with disabilities are interested in jobs where they can build their resumes and/or employment positions and potentially grow with a company. Meaningful employment outcomes for individuals in supported employment are jobs that have full parity with other jobs within the workplace in terms of how people are hired, supervised and compensated; the opportunities they have to interact with co-workers; and the access they have to job advancement and career opportunities.

Quality Indicator #2: Informed Choice and Control

The opportunity to make choices concerning employment, living arrangements, and recreation has been limited or nonexistent for many individuals with disabilities (Gilson, 1998). It has become increasingly evident that the powerlessness and lack of direction frequently felt by people with disabilities are related to attitudes and practices of service providers, care givers, funding agencies, and society in general, rather than any true limitations as a result of an individual's disability (Brooke, Wehman, Inge and Parent, 1995; Wehman, 1981; Browder et al, 2001). High quality supported employment programs avoid this trap by empowering their customers to make choices and to take control of their career path. A critical factor in assessing the overall quality of a supported employment program is analyzing the data to determine if the customers have choice over the process and are truly in control of their rehabilitation outcomes. Organizations that support choice and control shape their service delivery practices by the wants and needs of their customers. Key features or quality indicators of a supported employment program would assess informed choice and control by reviewing the following indicators to determine the level of involvement by customers:

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| ■ Who selected the service provider? | ■ Does the customer like the job? |
| ■ Who selected the job coach? | ■ Is the customer satisfied with the service? |
| ■ Who selected the job? | ■ Is the customer able and willing to retain the job? |

Customers of supported employment must be in a position to not only choose their service provider and employment support personnel, but to also have some measure of control over the services they seek. Supported employment customers must be free to participate in supported employment services by choosing a service

provider and employment specialist, by accepting or declining a specific job, or by electing to resign or continue employment with a particular company without fear of reprisal. Informed choice and control must be a key feature to any employment support service assisting people with significant disabilities in their search for employment. Customer choice is a core principle of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) (Public Law 105-202) that established the one stop career centers. Customer choice is also a core principle of the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work established by the, The Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (Public Law 106-170).

Quality Indicator #3: Level and Nature of Supports

Supported employment is perhaps best characterized as employment with supports. Key to the career success of people with significant disabilities is the unique arrangements of the necessary supports that will assist each customer of supported employment in obtaining and maintaining competitive employment (Brooke, Inge, Armstrong & Wehman, 1997). Detailed job analysis, identification and use of community and workplace supports, systematic instruction, compensatory strategies, orientation training, and workplace accommodations have always been the cornerstones of a well-developed plan of support (Inge, 1997; Parent, Wehman & Bricout, 2001) . The term *natural supports* was first noted in federal policy with the 1992 Rehabilitation Act Amendments (P.L.102-569) that included "natural supports" as a possible source of ongoing (Sec. 7.33.C. vii) and extended services (Sec. 635, 6.C. vii). Yet, quality supported employment service providers must move beyond the language provided in federal policy and attempt to provide the exact type and intensity of support across all aspects of their services. For example, an employment specialist would not want to provide any more or less support than actually necessary to assist the supported employment customer in obtaining, learning, or maintaining employment. Supported employment providers, in consultation with their customers, would always approach a task discussing the least intrusive approach and only move to a more intrusive level of support if that was the desire of the customer and was needed to achieve the desired outcome. As discussed in Quality Indicator #2, the supported employment customer must be in control of selecting his/her own supports. The following quality indicators can be used to assess a programs ability to provide the appropriate level and nature of support to achieve the desired employment outcome:

- Do customers assist in selecting the support option?
- Does the program advocate moving from a least intrusive level of support to a more intrusive support option based upon customer need?
- Does the program have staff skilled at identifying possible workplace support options?
- Are program staff members skilled at matching support options to the learning style of their customers?
- Does the program have staff skilled at interviewing employers and coworkers to gage their interest and willingness to provide supports?
- Are staff members sufficiently skilled to predict which support option will result in the greatest level of independence for the customer?
- Does program staff begin thinking about fading supports from the first day employment?

Identifying, selecting and facilitating supports that promote independence and employment stability is a complex task with multiple factors that must be considered. Working with the supported employment customer, the employment specialist must be skilled at analyzing data results along with supervisor and coworkers comments to determine the exact nature and level of intensity of support that will best match the employment situation. When this process is done correctly supported employment customers are assured a high quality supported employment service.

Quality Indicator #4: Employment of Individuals with Truly Significant Disabilities

The 1986 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 included Title VI-C which designated supported employment as a program. However it was not until the 1992 Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act (P.L. 102-569) that the regulations made major changes to the eligibility provisions and included language that clearly stated that the programs was designed for people with the *most* significant disabilities. Supported employment was never intended to serve the typical vocational rehabilitation customer. Rather, this service option was created for those people who experience truly significant disabilities who traditionally were not able to obtain competitive employment through vocational rehabilitation services. P.L. 102-569 further describes customers of supported employment as those individuals who have obtained intermittent employment but have not been successful in maintaining competitive employment, and who need long term support to achieve competitive employment.

Supported employment service providers need to work with potential customers and rehabilitation counselors to ensure that the organization is marketing their service to the appropriate customers (Green & Brooke, 2001). Employment service organizations can analyze this quality indicator by determining who is accessing their services and reviewing the following questions.

- What are the customers' primary and secondary disabilities?
- What are the customers' functional capabilities?
- What are the customers' prior work or service histories?
- What other characteristics have presented a barrier to employment for the customer?
- How do supported employment customers compare with those individuals accessing other rehabilitation services?

These indicators should provide a clear and concise picture of the customers that is being served through supported employment services. The service provider needs to match up these results with the federal regulations to determine if they are truly serving individuals with significant disabilities, for whom the services are intended.

Quality Indicator #5: Amount of Hours Worked Weekly

Number of hours worked weekly is a critical quality indicator for a supported employment program for a number of reasons. First on an individual customer basis, hours of weekly employment establish the base for a number of meaningful employment outcomes. Lower hour, part-time jobs are usually characterized by lower pay and

limited benefits. In comparison, employment of 30 or more hours per week brings better access to higher wages and potential benefits such as health coverage, vacation and sick leave, and insurance coverage. Higher hours of weekly employment also improve access to work-related training provided through the employer and social interaction with co-workers. From a program perspective, supporting a high percentage of customers in lower hour jobs creates a variety of possible strains on the program. What are the programs funded responsibilities for helping its customers fill non-work hours? Many funding agencies require a certain level of program involvement per week; lower hours of employment can create situations where programs turn to more center-based, segregated services to fill hours. This practice perpetuates center based services, ties-down staff who could be shifted to supporting customers in the community, and creates confusion among program participants and their families as customers move back and forth between community integrated work and set-apart, center based services.

On an customer-to-customer basis, hours worked per week should reflect the preferences and choices of each individual. An individual might choose to work under 30 hours a week because of concerns over maintaining Social Security Disability Benefits, because of work preferences, and/or because of work tolerances reflecting the residual effects of the disability and the supports needed for that person to work. For example, an individual who needs personal assistance services at work might have limited hours of this service available and will therefore work a more limited number of hours. Overall, however, the hours of weekly employment consistently achieved by participants are a valid indicator of the quality of a supported employment program. Programs can analyze this quality indicator by using data on hours of weekly employment to answer the following questions:

- What is the average for hours of weekly competitive employment for program participants?
- What percent of program participants work in competitive employment over 30 hours per week or under 20 hours per week?
- For those participants working competitively under 30 hours per week, how many of hours of alternative programming is provided weekly?
- What is the satisfaction level of participants with their hours of weekly competitive employment?

Supported employment programs that have a high percentage of customers working consistently under 30 hours a week (or working sporadic hours from week to week back and forth above and below 30 hours) are not achieving quality employment outcomes. State funding agencies, such as VR and Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities, can reward achievement of employment outcomes of 30 hours or more per week with funding incentives. Vocational Rehabilitation counselors should strongly push for employment outcomes over 30 hours a week and should provide the funding support needed to achieve such outcomes.

Quality Indicator #6: Number of Individuals from the Program Working Regularly

Earlier in this paper, reference was made to the approximate 3:1 ratio of non-competitive to competitive work outcomes for persons served by MR/DD agencies nationally (Braddock et al, 2002). There are a high number of

persons with significant disabilities who have very limited access to competitive employment. The negative impact of non-employment on the lives of people with disabilities is substantial. Participation in non-competitive work programs by people with a disability severely limits earnings, as demonstrated by the disparity between earnings from sheltered employment and earnings through supported employment reported previously in this paper. It restricts personal choices, both in terms of available resources and opportunities. It creates unnecessary dependency and perpetuates the myths and stereotypes related to disability and non-productivity. And maintaining non-competitive programs locks down resources within more segregated settings, resources that are needed to provide community integrated workplace supports.

Identifying the number of persons from a program working regularly should not be limited to just those individuals who are in the supported employment program. Many supported employment programs are a component of larger agencies who offer multiple services, sometimes including non-competitive employment services (Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998). The true measure of quality of supported employment outcomes achieved by a program is reflected in the percent of individuals in its overall enrollment who are working regularly in competitive employment. In an enrollment of 100 individuals, if 75 are involved in non-competitive activities while 25 are working regularly in competitive employment, this program is stuck at the national 3:1 ratio and fails this quality indicator. However if this same program establishes a clearly stated conversion goal and begins making steady progress towards a majority of its participants working in competitive employment, then it is making clearly observable progress. Programs can analyze the quality of their efforts to support their customers in working regularly in competitive employment by using data to answer the following questions:

- What is the average number of program enrollees presently working in competitive employment?
- What percent of program enrollees work regularly in competitive employment?
- For each of the last three years, what percent of program enrollees worked regularly in competitive employment?
- What is the satisfaction level of participants with their program of services?

There are a number of factors that influence the services offered by programs that provide supported employment services. The continuation of non-competitive employment services can reflect federal, state, and community level funding policies and precedents; pressure from families of individuals with disabilities to maintain these services; pressure from the Boards and Administrators to maintain traditional missions and services; and/or lack of confidence by program staff in their ability to support competitive employment outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities. However, quality supported employment programs have demonstrated that each of these prohibitive factors can be overcome. The number of persons working regularly in competitive employment is truly a critical quality indicator for a supported employment program.

Quality Indicator #7: Well Coordinated Job Retention System

The provision of ongoing supports as long as needed after employment is the core characteristic of supported employment that differentiates it from other employment services. There is strong evidence that the maintenance of ongoing supports after employment is a characteristic of successful supported employment programs that generate better employment outcomes (Bond, Becker, Drake, Rapp, Meisler, Lehman, Bell, & Blyer, 2001). Well coordinated job retention systems provide ongoing individualized supports that assist the employee with a disability in areas such as structuring needed workplace accommodations, monitoring and assessing job stability, adjusting supports to address changing needs both at and away from the job site, and providing other supports that enhance job retention (Ridgway & Rapp, 1998). Well coordinated job retention systems provide replacement assistance in situations of job loss or job enhancement.

Supported employment providers face a substantial challenge in operating a well coordinated job retention system that extends into the extended services phase of supported employment services after the time limited funding from Vocational Rehabilitation ends. Although there are very few studies that have focused on extended services, there is evidence that many supported employment providers have very limited access to funding for extended services. Extended services funding provided to agencies frequently does not cover the cost for providing these services and monthly follow along services are often funded from other program revenues (West, Johnson, Cone, Hernandez, & Revell, 1998). This limited commitment of funding agencies to extended services continues despite the findings from a recent study citing clear evidence that maintaining employment supports well into the job tenure and beyond the limited period of VR funding is often critical to addressing work related problems. This same study noted the increases in the contact time that occur in extended services during the 3-6 month tenure in employment to address non-work related problems and career advancement interests ((West, Wehman, & Revell, 2002). Although funding for job retention services continues to be a problem for supported employment agencies, it is clear that the most successful supported employment programs are those that can operate a well coordinated job retention service.

Programs can analyze the quality of their job retention efforts for customers working in competitive employment by answering the following questions:

- What percent of individuals placed into employment retain their jobs for less than 90 days; for 90 to 180 days; for more than 180 days?
- What is the replacement rate for those individuals who do not retain employment and what is the average time span between job loss and replacement?
- For those individuals placed into employment who do not retain their jobs, what specifically are the reasons for separation from employment?
- Does the program maintain a job retention contact schedule with its employed customers that involves regular contact to monitor job stability?
- Is there clearly identifiable extended services funding in place with the program that supports both planned and unplanned responses to retention issues?

Quality Indicator #8: Employment Outcome Monitoring and Tracking System

Traditionally, supported employment programs have developed standards, objectives, and processes in an effort to build and promote quality supported employment services. Program managers and staff design standards and indicators to assist in gauging the success of their program services. The typical areas assessed include: philosophy, mission, administration, fiscal management, image, community resources, personnel, job or career development, job training and support, long-term supports, and employee relations.

With many programs, the primary reason for organizational assessment is to meet an agency need for supported employment provider certification. This certification is required to become a local vendor for supported employment and to qualify for state or local funding. However, most supported employment organizations recognize the need for assessing quality and are committed to providing excellent services. Yet, many supported employment personnel report that collecting and analyzing data on quality indicators is an unrealistic expectation. For this reason, some programs have stopped assessing collecting the data necessary for an accurate assessment of the overall quality of their service organization.

Collecting and analyzing data on supported employment service outcomes does not have to be difficult or time consuming. Without accurate and consistent data, it is impossible to accurately assess the quality of a supported employment program, particularly in the core quality indicators of serving persons with significant disabilities, achieving meaningful employment outcomes, customer choice and employer satisfaction, and job retention. Programs can analyze the quality of their employment outcome monitoring and tracking system through these questions:

- Does the program maintain a longitudinal, data based information system that contains accurate and up-to-date information for program participants on employment status and longevity, wages, benefits, hours of weekly employment, and types of jobs?
- Is information on employment outcomes for participants reported in a format that makes it readily accessible for review by current and prospective program participants, funding agency representatives, potential employers, and other community partners (i.e. One Stop Centers, Benefit Planners, Independent Living Centers)?
- Does the program regularly track and report-on the satisfaction of participants with the services they receive and the employment outcomes they achieve?

Quality Indicator #9: Maximizing Integration and Community Participation

Integration and community participation are important outcome measures of quality services. The idea that individuals with significant disabilities can and should work in regular business environments and participate fully in life of their communities is the guiding philosophy behind supported employment. Work is a highly valued activity in the American culture and offers wage earners numerous benefits. Having a job and paying taxes can enhance an individual's status in the community and offer the employee an opportunity to interact with co-workers and to develop a host of relationships at work and in the community.

There are multiple factors that can be examined when determining if an employee is integrated in the workplace and participating in the community. Analyzing a business site to determine if the company offers an opportunity for

integration is important, as is the need to repeat the analysis periodically as the customer becomes more familiar to his or her coworkers. In addition, the employee's work area, work hours, and satisfaction level play an important role in assessing a customer's integration and community participation. A negative answer to any of the following questions could be an indicator that intervention is necessary to improve the overall quality of the employment situation and consequently, the services of the supported employment program.

- Does the company offer opportunities for physical and social integration, such as common break areas, and company social functions?
- Does the employee's work area facilitate physical and social interactions through close proximity of coworkers, shared responsibilities, unrestricted communication, etc.?
- To what extent is the customer integrated? Does he or she work and socialize with others or in isolation?
- In what activities does the customer engage in the community, such as going out with friends, participating in clubs and groups, etc.?
- Is the customer satisfied with the job and the level of community integration?

Quality Indicator #10: Employer Satisfaction

Supported employment service providers must not view themselves as human service providers, but rather as employment service agencies. This is a significant paradigm shift for many supported employment organizations that emphasizes a competitive and valued offering of needed services to employers. The language must be business to business; the message must be clear: "Our company will fill your personnel needs!" This shift establishes an approach that presents the service, as well as the person with a significant disability, in a competent and respected manner. In addition, it focuses the organization's resources on the business community and is designed to satisfy employment needs (Green and Brooke, 2001).

Job placement personnel with rehabilitation programs are still fairly hidden from the business community. Businesses looking to recruit and hire people with disabilities can't seem to find the rehabilitation programs in the community, nor do they know how to recruit people with disabilities who want to work (Peck and Kirkbride, 2001). It is fair to say that most rehabilitation professionals assisting people with disabilities in obtaining employment do not see themselves as customer representatives with direct responsibility for building relationships with the business community. Yet, the task of customer relationships should be the primary responsibility for all rehabilitation personnel. Programs can measure the quality of their service to employers by reviewing the following quality indicators.

- Does the supported employment program develop business profiles complete with business culture notations and language specific to the identified business?
- Does the supported employment provide staff development training that training rehabilitation personnel to use business friendly language?

(continued)

- Has the supported employment program established a sense of urgency that is responsive to the business community?
- Does the supported employment program do community outreach and provide training on disability awareness?
- Does the supported employment program serve as liaison for the business and people with disabilities?
- Does the supported employment program involve the business community in the development of the organization's policy?

The above indicators of a quality supported employment program ensure that the community rehabilitation program is developing strong strategies for developing productive business relationships. These are the key areas which business considers roadblocks to productive relationships with rehabilitation programs (Egan, 2001).

Concluding Remarks: How Valid is the “Paradigm Shift?”

The “paradigm shift” refers to movement from center based day program services to business or industry based employment services. This term has also been used (Bradley et.al, 1994) to discuss community living with the thought that deinstitutionalization of persons with disabilities would lead to integrated community living in apartments and other supported living arrangements. Clearly, the dream of most of the advocates going back to Boggs (1959), Wolfensberger (1972), Taylor (1988; 2001) , Brown and his colleagues (Brown and York, 1974) and Wehman (1981) has been to see this paradigm shift occur in service delivery. That is, greatly reduce all services that occur in specialized settings exclusively for persons with disabilities and instead utilize normalized community services. The philosophy and, of late, the research (e.g Mank, 2001) supports this approach as the best way to help persons with disabilities be independent and maximize their potential. More importantly, as Gilson (1998) has noted and as the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990) personifies, this is what persons with disabilities want: their own empowerment and capacity and opportunity to choose the quality of life they want. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld this belief through the classic Olmstead decision rendered in 1999.

From an empirical standpoint, the research in integrated employment, unfortunately, clearly does not support that the paradigm shift has occurred. This is not rocket science. Clearly one only has to glance at literature from Braddock, et al. (2002) or Wehman, Revell and Kregel (1998) or McGaughey, et. al (1994) to see we are not there yet. The US Dept. of Education supported employment systems change grants initiated in 1986 got things started in a positive way (Mank & Revell, 2001). Clearly, however, there has been a lack of follow through by both the federal government and the states with policies to strongly encourage full implementation. Mank (1994) and Wehman and Kregel (1995) term this problem “underachievement” or “being at the crossroads”; Wehman also called for 250,000 persons being placed in supported employment. By some counts this has occurred but even this achievement still falls far short of a full paradigm shift of numbers of people when you look at the overall base of individuals remaining in segregated centers.

So what positive things have occurred to give some reason for hope that a paradigm shift in employment services can and will truly occur? Well, there are several reasons for cautious optimism. First, the first wave of people with significant disabilities are actually working for the first time, and their participation in competitive employment has gone from being exclusively episodic to being widespread across the entire country (Wehman, Revell and Kregel, 1998). This gives other programs and advocates and consumers something to work from and sets the bar of expectation higher than it was previously.

Second, the legislation and court decisions from the federal government seem to be moving in the right direction. There is the ADA, the amended Rehabilitation Act, the new Ticket to Work Act with the Medicaid Buy-In option (Cheek, 2001) that are all positive. In addition, the New Freedom Initiative policies of the present Administration and the Olmstead court decision are all areas that seem to favor and be supportive of integrated competitive employment.

Third, the level of awareness about disability from the business community, persons with disabilities, and families all seem to be at the highest level in 20 years. There will always be a shortage of human service funds or these funds will not be spent efficiently, but if the collective power of persons with disabilities and their families with business is put forward at a grassroots community level, the likelihood of getting a true paradigm shift in the next 5-10 years is much more probable.

The overall key to breaking the existing cycle in our view is to concentrate and focus much more extensively on the youth with disabilities in America. All efforts from the One Stop career centers, rehabilitation selection process, school employment and career building priorities, and Social Security incentives should be most heavily focused upon youth and young adults aged 16-25. This is where the cycle needs to be broken once and for all. As more and more young people refuse to go to segregated programs and their families or guardians refuse to accept these programs as a base for services, states and localities will have no choice but to create new service vendors who provide supports for people with disabilities working in competitive employment.

Depending on the existing providers is a major mistake. They have had 25 years do change their services, and they have failed to make the change for the most part. It is time for colleges and universities, One Stop Career centers, medium and large business such as Manpower, Inc. and others to step up. The federal government needs to fund new vendors of services, and persons with disabilities need to step-in and run their own programs. The Centers for Independent Living need to more aggressively move in the area of providing employment programs and workplace supports. The next five years hold tremendous potential. The opportunity and technical skill level is there. Now we need to do it.

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