

Successful work supports for persons with SCI: Focus on job retention

Pamela S. Targett^a, Paul H. Wehman^{a,*}, William O. McKinley^b and Cynthia L. Young^a

^a*VCU – Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, 1314 W. Main Street, P.O. Box 842011, Richmond, VA 23284, USA*

^b*Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, 1300 E. Marshall St. 1st Floor, Room 1-057, P.O. Box 980661, Richmond, VA 23298, USA*

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Abstract. This paper review barriers to work for individuals with SCI and how these can be overcome using a Supported Employment approach. Problems faced at work and six job retention strategies are described.

Keywords: Supported employment, SCI, work, job retention

1. Introduction

Today, the vast majority of people with severe disabilities remain unemployed and often unserved despite recent legislation like the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) and advancements in the development of assistive technology [10]. Even after completing post secondary education and training programs, individuals with disabilities continue to experience rates of unemployment that far exceed those of the general population [1,6]. The National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center [8] reported that 59% of individuals with a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) between the ages of 16 to 59 were working at the time of their injury. However, only 29% were employed eight years later.

Inaccessible work places and employer's who fail to provide accommodations have been cited as reasons for unemployment [12]. A study, by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN), which surveyed more than 1000 individuals with SCI who were employed, revealed that 75% of those individuals requested assistance with accommodations in order to maintain employment or improve their productivity at work [4]. More than 50% of

the requests were for information on new products or modifications to existing equipment.

Other obstacles preventing return to work include, lack of transportation, structural design problems that limit physical access to or around the work place, difficulties performing essential job functions, not being perceived as a person who could get the job done by the hiring agent, or the need for a personal assistant [7, 11,12].

2. Supported employment

These and other obstacles to work are addressed within the Supported Employment (SE) approach. Supported Employment uses a vocational rehabilitation professional, sometimes referred to as an "Employment Specialist" or "job coach" to assist persons with disabilities with gaining and maintaining work. In addition, Supported Employment supports the employer with identifying and overcoming barriers in the employment process. Supported Employment, authorized by the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986, is one vocational rehabilitation strategy that holds the promise of reducing unemployment for persons with the most significant disabilities [5]. In recent years, more and

*Corresponding author: Paul Wehman, Ph.D.; Tel.: +1 804 828 1851; E-mail: pwehman@atlas.vcu.edu.

more individuals with severe physical disabilities, such as SCI, have accessed Supported Employment as a service option to assist them with employment. This approach has also been recommended to improve retention rates among individuals with SCI who are currently employed. Although provision of services is highly individualized to the situation on hand, generally it includes the following phases briefly described below.

The first step usually entails helping the job seeker establish a career direction by clarifying or identifying personal strengths and potential vocational support needs. To accomplish this, the job seeker and the employment specialist spend time getting to know one another and discuss abilities, expectations, and potential barriers to work. In addition, the person is observed while engaged in daily activities. Planning is person-centered and geared around the individual's desires and needs. This helps ensure that the focus is on the individuals existing strengths and also promotes personal choice and involvement [3]. Job seekers who have difficulty expressing desires or when a lot of people have valuable information about the person's abilities, a group meeting like the Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope or PATH may be beneficial [9]. Inge et al. [5] describes using the PATH process to identify a person's dreams, abilities and support needs; and establishes the objectives and activities needed to reach a vocational goal.

Once a career direction is established, a job search is initiated. The employment specialist makes business contacts on behalf of the jobseeker in a quest to identify acceptable and suitable work opportunities. Business contacts may be made for the first time or with employers whom the Employment Specialist has well-established relationships. Prior to referring the candidate for employment opportunities, the employment specialist takes the time to learn about the employers needs, job options, and offers services like training and resources on employment and disability related issues. Whenever a viable job opportunity is identified, the jobseeker is contacted to determine if he or she wants to move forward and apply for the job. If so, applications are completed and an interview takes place.

Once hired, the employment specialist provides support to both the employee with the disability and the employer. The support is customized and can range from offering information and minimum intervention; to giving instruction on what to do and follow up; to advocacy and providing extensive assistance. Supports might include identifying accommodations or provid-

ing one to one job skills training to the new hire on certain job functions or sometimes the Employment Specialist will ensure that job tasks are done, while the necessary supports are being identified and put into place. For example, if an office clerk needed a track ball mouse to operate the computer, the employment specialist might actually perform the necessary task with the standard mouse while waiting for the new equipment.

The guiding principles are to 1) compliment, not supplant, existing workplace supports and 2) empower the worker with a disability to do what he or she can for himself or herself while providing the necessary support that enables the individual to reach a goal within a reasonable time frame. Naturally, the level, type, and intensity of support will vary depending upon the specific situation on hand.

Off-site work support services for the employee with the disability, are also available. This might include assisting the person with arranging transportation to and from work, providing information on using Social Security work incentives, or developing action plans to resolve difficulties that could negatively impact work. For example, an action plan might include information on what to do if the individual's personal assistant or specialized transporter failed to show up on a given workday.

As the new hire becomes more and more proficient at work, the Employment Specialist fades his or her presence from the jobsite. Afterwards, long-term and ongoing employment support is provided. This characteristic distinguishes Supported Employment from traditional vocational rehabilitation services and usually entails bi-monthly contact with the employee and/or employer to inquire about how things are going and provide additional supports if needed. Although some individuals with severe physical disabilities can obtain and maintain employment alone, or with time-limited services from a state vocational rehabilitation agency, many others will not be able to do so without ongoing supports.

The following case study illustrates how one individual returned to work using a Supported Employment approach.

3. Case study #1

Jason is a 56-year-old man with an eleventh grade education who sustained a spinal cord injury ten years ago as a result of an assault. Prior to injury, he had been

employed as a construction worker. Jason currently uses a power wheelchair for mobility, has no functional use of his lower extremities, and has partial use of his upper extremities. When referred to Supported Employment, Jason was residing in a skilled nursing facility, where he received assistance with activities of daily living. He had not worked since the date of his injury and was interested in vocational support.

Jason learned about Supported Employment from his physician and was referred to Supported Employment by the state vocational rehabilitation agency. The employment specialist contacted Jason and he agreed to an initial interview in his home to begin to explore his vocational interests, abilities, and support needs. During the interview, the employment specialist noted that Jason had good communication skills, a friendly demeanor, and a strong desire to work. Jason reported that he would like to work part-time to earn some pocket money and help him contribute to his child support payments.

Jason and the employment specialist also spent time together in the community in order to get to know one another and identify abilities and potential support needs. For example, one activity involved examining work opportunities at the mall and another involved going to the public library and using a computer to explore the local business websites. During these activities, the employment specialist noted Jason's functional abilities in the context of real community environments. This gave her additional insight into Jason's potential employment support needs. The employment specialist would meet with employers to develop potential job opportunities and contact Jason at least once a week to review her findings. Jason would think about places he would like to work and talk to family about possible leads. Unfortunately, Jason's network was limited to his daughter, nursing home professionals, and residents and few leads were generated this way. The employment specialist also tapped into her own network of business contacts that she had developed over the years and tapped into the hidden job market of businesses that were not advertising for employees. By week two, Jason's job search was in full swing.

A part-time receptionist position was located at a local transportation company that involved greeting and announcing visitors, answering the telephone, taking messages, or transferring incoming calls to the appropriate parties. The employment specialist contacted Jason and found that he was eager to apply for the job, so an interview was arranged. Jason and the employment specialist met prior to the interview to dis-

cuss the types of accommodations that he might need to get the job done. This information was used during the interview to help alleviate concerns the employer might have about Jason's ability to accomplish the job as well as the cost and implementation of accommodations. Jason was hired and started work about a week later after a portable ramp was purchased. Prior to the first day of work, the employment specialist assisted Jason with arranging some of the supports necessary to begin work. For instance, the employment specialist assisted Jason with contacting the specialized transportation provider to set up a ride, speaking to the head nurse at his home to arrange a schedule to be out of bed and ready for work on time, and meeting with his social worker to review how to report earnings to the home and the social security administration. She also helped him identify and shop for appropriate work attire and contact his vocational rehabilitation counselor to discuss support needs and sharing costs to pay for necessary accommodations.

Jason participated in the employer's new employee orientation and received three days of on-the-job training from a back-up receptionist. After participating in this training with Jason, the employment specialist began to provide additional skills training on certain tasks. She also assisted Jason and his employer with choosing, securing, and putting into place the necessary workplace supports. Table 1 provides a listing of Jason's Workplace Supports.

Throughout his employment Jason has received long-term support. Over this period of time, a myriad of issues have been resolved that if left unattended may have adversely affected Jason's employment. Some of the problems he encountered included customer complaints about his ability to answer the telephone. For example, incoming callers complained to management that Jason's speech sounded "slurred – like he was intoxicated." Another issue related to Jason's ability to transfer the telephone calls correctly. For example, he would transfer a telephone call without waiting for a response from the other party on the phone or the employees within the office.

Other problems that surfaced, related to his ability to effectively communicate with the management. For example, Jason was not adhering to the company's policy for requesting time off by providing his employer with any advance notice. Naturally, a lack of notice made it difficult for the employer to find a replacement and raised concerns about Jason's job performance.

Jason also indicated having "personality conflicts" with members of management from time to time. Other

Table 1
Jason's Accommodation Chart

| Issue Presented | Solution/Accommodation |
|---|---|
| Old building with no accessible entrance | Built and installed accessible ramp at back entrance |
| Back hallway very narrow and it is difficult to maneuver into work area | Co-workers help maneuver chair around corner |
| Back entrance kept locked | Co-workers open door at arrival time |
| Difficulty accessing equipment because it was too low | Created small slanted table to sit on top of desk that allowed equipment to be in reach |
| Answering telephone | Uses headset; toggle switch attached to the telephone; Uses cushioned pointer to operate telephone |
| Taking telephone messages | Uses tape recorder to record messages; uses cushioned pointer to operate tape recorder; employer provides tapes |
| Unable to see if employees are present because offices are behind him | Mirror placed above work station to view co-workers behind him |

Table 2
Jason's Long-Term Supports

| |
|---|
| Issue: Co-worker complained repeatedly to management about Jason's hygiene and the management expressed discomfort addressing this issue with Jason. |
| Resolution: Employment specialist mediated a meeting between Jason and management to address this concern. Notably, management nor the employment specialist had recognized this as a problem and since the co-worker transferred the issue has not resurfaced. |
| Issue: Customers complained that they had to call back and leave a message for personnel because Jason did not come back on line to assist them after transferring the line to an employee who did not pick up the call. Jason indicated to the employment specialist that he was using this approach because it was faster and that he did not remember how to do what was required. |
| Resolution: Employment specialist provided additional skills training on how to transfer calls and take messages from customers. During training, Jason also revealed to the employment specialist that he was upset with the atmosphere at work and some residential concerns were affecting his performance. These issues were discussed further and Jason changed his attitude. |
| Issue: Customers complained and management noted that Jason's speech had become slurred. Some customer's inquired about whether or not he was intoxicated. |
| Resolution: The employment specialist investigated the behaviors with Jason and at his request the residential staff. No causes were identified. After this conversation Jason's speech improved. It is believed that he may have been having a few drinks prior to work and decided to stop doing this once the issue was brought to his attention. |
| Issue: The assisted nursing facility where Jason resides threatened to evict him because he was not paying his bills. |
| Resolution: The employment specialist met with Jason to review the written charges and explained these in terms that he could understand. She also helped him develop a plan of action to address the charges, which included getting his daughter involved to help him advocate for himself with the residential administration. It was revealed that Jason was not purposefully attempting to not pay his bills, but he simply did not know up until the receipt of the threat that he had to pay the bills. |

issues addressed at work, related to Jason's personal hygiene and his ability to stay alert or awake while at work. The employment specialist was able to direct Jason on ways to resolve his concerns in a direct and professional manner. In addition to assisting Jason with problem-solving these issues, the employment specialist also helped him resolve some personal matters outside of work. Table 2 provides some examples of Jason's long-term support issues and how they were addressed over the years.

Today, Jason has moved out of the skilled nursing facility and into his own apartment. He has hired a personal care assistant to assist him with his activities of daily living. He chose to move to an apartment that is located near work. Now he can transport himself to work and he is no longer reliant on specialized transportation providers. Jason has been employed for six

years. He and the employer continue to receive ongoing follow up visits from the employment specialist twice a month.

The case study illustrates how a proactive approach to problem solving and workplace supports was used to promote Jason's job retention. A discussion of some additional strategies to assist individuals with physical disabilities with job retention will follow; but first, we will briefly examine some of the major problems individuals with disabilities may face at work that may adversely affect job tenure.

4. Problems at work

Experiencing problems at work is common for all people with or without a disability. It is not unusual for

an employee to face difficulties at some time in their career. Some problems encountered are common to all workers, while others may be specifically associated with a particular disability. For example, sometimes a job will be terminated due to employer problems like, seasonal slowdowns, relocation, bankruptcy, or other financial problems. A change in management can also cause an upset. These types of problems are caused by the business, not the worker, and could adversely affect job tenure for any employee whether disabled or not.

Generally, coworkers are supportive of other employees. However, occasionally problems can be generated by others that can make work difficult for a person at work. In the case of an employee with a disability, coworkers may resent the new employee if he or she is perceived as receiving “special treatment.” This “special treatment,” is often a simple accommodation for the employee with the disability, like a modified work schedule or reassignment of marginal tasks to another employee. In some instances this might lead to the perception that the employee is not pulling his or her weight, causing more work for others, or a slow down in production. Additionally, some coworkers may feel uneasy around a person with a physical disability, and if left unattended this could lead to problems on the job.

Employment may also become jeopardized because of problems stemming from the service provider. For example, if time is not taken to acknowledge the employer’s needs and the jobseekers’ expectations, it is possible that the new hire may end up in a job that cannot be accomplished, even with accommodations and support. Sometimes a task may be too difficult to perform or require a high level of productivity that the employee is not able to reach. Also, if the job search is not “thoughtful,” the provider may find that the jobseeker is simply not interested. As previously stated, workplace supports must be tailored to the situation at hand. Employment Specialists must be responsive to the needs of employers and desires of job seekers. They must also be well trained to carry out their duties. Lack of the proper type and intensity of support, at the right time and place, could culminate in a job termination.

At other times, a job may be at risk because of problems related to the worker or the disability itself. For example, the worker may not be able to meet certain performance standards. Excessive tardiness or absenteeism can cause problems. Poor appearance and hygiene may also impact job retention.

Occasionally jobs are jeopardized by family members or caregivers. For example, a residential provider may be concerned about how earned wages will de-

crease disability benefit payments and effect rent collection, or may not be staffed to get the person with a disability, up and out of bed in time to get off to work. Problems with worker hygiene may also result from unsupportive caregivers. In addition, if the family does not support the employee’s desire to work, members may sabotage this effort. For instance, a family member may go to the jobsite and interact with the employer in a way that threatens the persons’ job security, or creates problems at home that impact the individuals’ performance.

All employees, either with or without a disability, encounter problems on the job at some point in time. It is important to note, that separations from work are often the result of a culmination of problems over a period of time. In other words, termination from work is usually a process, rather than an event. In addition, implementing workplace supports can help alleviate or solve many problems. (Proactive planning is essential in helping prevent difficulties from ever surfacing and can enhance resolution if a problem occurs.)

5. Job retention strategies

This paper concludes with a review of some strategies that can be used to promote job retention for persons with Spinal Cord Injury. The reader must remember that employment services must be prescriptive and individualized to the person and situation on hand. Again, advance planning for responding to potential problems and keeping abreast of how things are going both at and away from the workplace are key ways to promote job retention.

5.1. Promote choice and identify jobs worth keeping

Job retention begins prior to the job search when the service provider takes the time to listen to the desires and goals of the primary customer (the individual with the disability). Taking the time to learn about personal abilities and preferences and encouraging choice and active participation in the employment process, is a critical first step toward job retention. Service providers need to embrace the fact that if a person, disabled or not, feels that a job is trivial, uninteresting, or out of alignment with his or her general skill, or educational level that the motivation to keep the job at hand may be diminished. As Mike West [14] stated so eloquently and simply “People stay in jobs worth getting and keeping.” He found that work opportunities that offered a

“sense of belonging”, as well as financial motivation promoted a desire to remain employed.

This simple fact challenges service providers to become familiar with a variety of approaches that will enable the individual to explore his or her career interests, personal dreams, and potential support needs. Informed choice will seldom be realized if an examination of these factors does not take place. Supported Employment providers must be familiar with career techniques that promote real choice. Thus it is advisable to take the time to understand what makes a “job worth keeping” for each individual served.

In addition, job seekers with disabilities need to be familiar with different types of occupations and creative work structures, so he or she can pursue work that is appealing and of interest. Some individuals may require time in functional community-based career exploration and assessment activities (i.e. tour workplace, informational interviews, job shadowing, etc.) to develop an understanding of possible career paths. It is also important that jobseekers are familiar with the concept of career development and understand how one job can serve as a stepping-stone to a future opportunity.

In some instances, the employment specialist may need to assist the person with the disability, and perhaps family members, with balancing desires and expectations with the constraints of the local labor market. However, it remains important to steer job search efforts by the person’s skills and aspirations, rather than only the availability of immediate job openings.

To achieve a good job match time must be taken to locate the right job, a process that is not all that different from those without disabilities. The difference may lie in the fact that the jobseeker with SCI and employer need to know what supports are needed to enable the work to be done.

In addition to assisting with identifying work that may be of interest to the jobseeker, the employment specialist should also examine the business, social climate, and work culture. It is unlikely that long-term satisfaction will be achieved, unless a person feels accepted and supported in the workplace. Dissatisfied employees may not perform up to standard and may have limited longevity at work.

5.2. *Ensure employer needs are understood and met*

Low productivity can lead to poor job performance. There are a number of factors that can result in poor productivity. For example, the worker may lack motivation to perform the job well; have limited access to

or is not able to use the assistive technology; or has inadequate support either on or off the job. Low quality work can also present problems. This may stem from a number of reasons. For example, the employee may not have received the appropriate training and does not understand how to perform the task correctly, or may be working so quickly or rushing through the tasks that important steps are overlooked. To help avoid these types of problem, it is essential that the new employee and employment specialist understand the employer’s performance standards. It also means gaining some knowledge about the job through a workplace analysis prior to submitting an application.

Although locating a successful job match is never guaranteed, the employment specialist can increase the likelihood of this occurring by having a good understanding of the job seeker’s abilities and support needs, as well as the employer’s expectations. With this knowledge, recommendations on the pros and cons associated with accepting a particular work opportunity can be presented and ideas on possible support can be formulated. Fortunately, it is often possible to overcome challenges with the right workplace supports.

5.3. *Provide or facilitate supports*

Lack of support on the job can lead to problems. Simply having an employment specialist go to work with the person with SCI is not sufficient enough to ensure success at work. As a “jack of many trades”, an employment specialist must become skilled at providing or facilitating the right type of supports, to bridge the gap between the individual’s initial job performance and the employer’s ultimate expectations. The specialist should also be savvy at offering or arranging necessary supports in the least intrusive way. Specifically, in a way that compliments existing workplace supports. For example, skills training would only be initiated after the employer’s new employee training has taken place. This requires that employment specialists develop competency in a number of areas, like building relationships, communication, negotiation and creative problem solving ability. Employment specialists should also be familiar with assistive technology. In some cases, it will be necessary to enlist the help of a rehabilitation engineer or occupational therapist. In addition, while waiting for the assistive technology to be purchased or fabricated, the employment specialist may have to assist the employee with performing the job.

5.4. *Provide long-term support*

The identification of potential barriers to employment should be ongoing in order to anticipate training, support, and advocacy needs. Long-term follow up services allow for open and ongoing communication among all parties to help identify potential problem areas early enough to be addressed. If the employer, employee with a disability, and employment specialist are communicating effectively and early enough about difficulties at work, it is often possible to resolve the problem by increasing the level of the support and/or identifying and implementing the necessary accommodations.

5.5. *Address off-the-job support needs*

Sometimes it is necessary to address issues that extend beyond the workplace that may affect job retention. This may relate to problems with the transportation provider or personal assistance services.

Some people with physical disabilities will be able to travel independently to work either using personal, public, or specialized transportation. Others will need support learning to access public or specialized transportation. Unreliable transportation can result in the worker being late to work or not being picked up in a timely manner. It is important for the employee to understand or have supports in place to assist him or her with solving problems related to transportation. Some of these problems can be worked out prior to going to the first day of work. For example, arranging a "time-frame" to arrive at work rather than an exact time with the employer may decrease tardiness. When difficulties arise, the employee must know how to independently solve or access support to assist with solving the problem at hand. For example, if the specialized transportation provider does not show up to the workplace on time, the person should know how to make a call or get someone to assist him with contacting the transportation provider. Also, a back up plan should be devised in case this effort fails.

Examining the person's pre-work routine to identify any difficulties with getting ready for work in a timely manner may help circumvent problems with tardiness or attendance. It is not unusual for individuals with physical disabilities like SCI to depend on others to assist them with their activities of daily living. A back up plan needs to be in place on what to do if the person's usual assistance is not available. The person must also be familiar with the employer's policy related to delay

or absence from work and follow the procedure either independently or with support.

A worker with physical disabilities may have poor personal appearance and hygiene, due to personal choice or a lack of support to attend to these issues. If the person is choosing not to attend to this issue then the matter may be addressed through job selection. Others may need instruction and/or reminders to perform these activities or support to discuss this issue with a caregiver. Sometimes, hiring a new personal assistant who will attend to these needs may be the solution.

Sometimes the person may simply refuse to go to work. If so, then the employment specialist must address this and examine the reasons why the individual is avoiding work. The person may have founded or unfounded fears associated with continuing to work or need assistance with problems at work or off the job. Every situation is different, thus the employment specialist must be skilled at probing for underlying causes.

As mentioned earlier, long-term follow up services can help keep a pulse on how things are going both at and away from work and promote a proactive approach to problem solving. The amount and type of assistance will vary depending on the person's abilities and circumstances at hand. Sometimes a person may simply need a referral to resources; at another time advocacy and intensive support may be required.

5.6. *Support career growth*

Accepting a job offer should be the decision of the person with the disability as is the decision to voluntarily leave their place of employment. A "one and done" approach to service delivery leads to a lifetime of dependence. As noted by Wehman et al. [13] using a supported employment approach assumes that individuals will be provided with opportunities to learn from their successes, as well as failures, and plan for future development.

Just like anyone in the general workforce, persons with disabilities need to have the opportunity to make a change. This may be due to a change in career direction, recognition of or development of new vocational strengths. If the person decides to terminate employment, for whatever reason, counseling on how to do this in a way that will not reflect poorly on the person, should be offered. Since many of the persons served may have difficulty finding steady work it is also advisable to counsel the person to try and keep the job, until other alternatives can be identified.

For all these reasons, the “length” of employment should not be the sole factor when determining an individual’s or a program’s effectiveness. It is the reason behind the termination that gives us insight into what was done “right” and what can be done better. Additionally, one of the ways people learn is by experience, which includes, making their own mistakes, observing what occurs, and deciding what this means to their life.

Employment Specialists must remember that accepting and terminating employment is an evolutionary stage in normal career development and self-determination. Future opportunities should not be curtailed, instead all involved must learn and grow from these experiences and move ahead.

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