Supported Employment and Natural Supports: A Critique and Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief but critical review of the concept of natural supports. In order to analyze what happens during extended services for supported employment, studying the workplace environment is an important indicator. It is wtihin this environment that the natural support mechanisms of co-workers and supervisors come into play. We look at how to define natural supports and the implications of the work environment quality on employee satisfaction and retention.

Supports are one way to help people with disabilities become more independent and able to control the direction of their lives. In recent years, a strong shift has occurred towards designing education and human service programs to emphasize the role of supports in enhancing the success of persons with disabilities. No one person is the same, with or without a disability. Every individual needs some level of assistance to succeed. There are some people, for example, with very severe disabilities who need a great deal of support to succeed in school, work, home, and the community. The challenge is to match each person to an individualized array of supports to meet personal goals directed at living and working in the community.

Ongoing supports, as defined in the amended regulations for the Federal Supported Employment Program (Federal Register, June 24, 1992, p. 28438), are those "needed to support and maintain an individual with severe disability in supported employment." Ongoing supports are activities and relationships that help a person maintain a job in the community. Supports differ for each individual and vary in type and intensity for the duration of employment. Those provided through the services of a job coach or employment specialist may be job specific or individual community supports.

It is difficult typically for a person with severe disabilities to take full advantage of all the support resources available to assist him or her achieve personal education, community living, or employment goals. Just because a support is available at the workplace or in the community does not necessarily mean that he or she will automatically access it or benefit from its use. Frequently, individuals with disabilities do not know what potential supports are available, how to choose among the alternatives, or how to go about accessing a desired support. A critical factor in the use of a variety of supports is the presence of a knowledgeable resource who assists the individual with a disability identify, choose, and access needed supports at whatever level of assistance he or she prefers.

The commitment to ongoing supports is the unique feature of supported employment that makes it possible for people with severe disabilities to sustain employment over time. Supports that continue indefinitely are provided both at and away from the job site, an approach significantly different from services provided in day programs and other segregated models. For example, more traditional models move people through a continuum of job readiness criteria before attempting to transition them to competitive work. Unfortunately, actual successful movement to competitive employment is rarely achieved by people with severe disabilities when served through this approach.

The U.S. Congress recognized the value of supported employment in 1986 and identified this approach as a vocational outcome in the Rehabilitation Act Amendments (Federal Register, 1987). It authorized funding under Title I and Title VI (Part C) for "time-limited post-employment services" leading to supported employment. The Act included "ongoing support services" as an essential element of supported employment and required the availability of 'extended services' before vocational rehabilitation funding could begin. Natural supports are identified in the Rehabilitation Act as one form of ongoing supports. In order to more fully analyze and explore the issue of extended service and long-term supports, a critique of natural supports follows.

DEFINITION OF NATURAL SUPPORTS

One of the major mechanisms for extended supported employment services is the use of what has been popularly termed "natural supports" (Nisbet and Hagner, 1988). Unfortunately, the concept of "natural supports" has not been easy to define or operationalize (Test & Wood, 1996 a,b). Consequently, some important questions arise, such as: What are natural supports? What are work supports? What is the relationship of natural supports to the implementation of supported employment?

Since Nisbet and Hagner (1988) first introduced the term "natural support", this concept has been discussed and applied with varying interpretations (West, Kregel, Hernandez and Hock, 1997). Paradoxically, this much discussed, widely practiced concept has yet to be clearly and unambiguously defined. In fact, authors in the supported employment literature do not appear to have a consensus on two basic issues. First, what distinguishes natural supports from other workplace or work-related supports, a question that is sometimes framed in terms of what does the qualifier "natural" mean? Second, what is the contribution of the job coach as a paid service provider vis-a-vis the contribution of co-workers, supervisors or employers to the integration of supported employees (Granger, Baron & Robinson, 1997)? It can be seen that these two questions are related inasmuch as the job coach-initiated support strategies may be perceived of as less "natural" than those initiated by co-workers, supervisors, or employers.

The first issue, difficulty in limiting the scope of "natural" supports, has been recognized by authors as confounding attempts to define the concept (Hagner, Butterworth & Keith, 1995). Nonetheless, natural supports have been distinguished from other strategies by some investigators (Storey & Garff, 1997), with one result being several authors electing to define their own natural support-like concepts. One opted for a term of more limited scope, "internal supports" (Fabian & Luecking, 1991); other authors developed a term of more limited application, "typicalness" (Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1997, 1998).

The second issue, paid versus unpaid supports, appears to underlie the general approach to natural supports. For example, some writers

appear to hold untested assumptions about how much a job coach facilitates or hinders the integration of workers with disabilities into a competitive workplace. At this point in time, the contribution of a job coach compared to co-workers, the employer and/or supervisor in the successful integration of an employee with a disability has not been empirically tested. However, Lee, Storey, Anderson, Goetz and Zivolich (1997) conducted a study comparing job coach training to employer mentoring. Their findings suggested that mentors helped facilitate more social interaction than job coaches. Unfortunately, they were unable to rule out differences in training methods and participant characteristics, and more importantly, one year lapsed between training and data collection (Lee, et al., 1997). This year-long lapse allowed for the possibility that other factors may have confounded what is presumed to be a job coach "training effect" compared to an employer mentoring effect.

In order to examine how other writers have denoted natural supports, we looked at nine articles on natural supports. Table 1 below provides a succinct overview of each of these papers. The type of study varied considerably among the seven empirical articles. Two of the studies were surveys (Unger, Parent, Gibson, Kane-Johnston & Kregel, 1997; West, et al. 1997). Three studies were qualitative, using staff notes and activities (Fabian, Edleman, & Leedy, 1993), case examples (Rogan, Hagner & Murphy, 1993), or interviews (Hagner, Butterworth & Keith, 1995). One study was observational using repeated measures (Lee, et al., 1997), and one employed archival data (Mank, et al., 1997; Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1998). The remaining two non-empirical articles were a conceptual piece (Fabian & Luecking, 1991) and a review article (Storey & Certo, 1996).

TABLE 1 -- CONCURRENT DEFINITIONS OF NATURAL SUPPORTS

Source/Title:	Fabian, Edelman, & Leedy (1993) -- *Linking workers with severe disabilities to social supports in the workplace: Strategies for addressing barriers.*
Design:	Qualitative Data Analysis of Naturl Support Workplace Demonstration Project using staff notes and activities.
Definition of Concept:	"A natural support approach refers to enhancing or linking individuals to existing social supports in the work environment that are available either informally (from co-workers and peers on the job) or formally (from supervisors and company sponsored employment programs)" (p.30).
	"Natural workplace support approaches require more intensive efforts up-front to link the employee to available supports since the approach does not rely on the continuing presence of the job coach" (p.31).
Source/Title:	Fabian, E.S., & Leucking, R.G. (1991) -- *Doing it the company way: Using internal company supports in the workplace.*
Design:	Conceptual Article
Definition of Concept:	"Natural workplace supports include such examples as using co-workers as job trainers for the supported employee, promoting mentoring relationships between

(continued)

the supported employee and others in the environment, and using the environmental cues as a means of sustaining new behaviors by the supported employee" (p.32).

Source/Title: Hagner, Butterworth, & Keith (1995) -- *Strategies and barriers in facilitating natural supports for employment of adults with severe disabilities.*

Design: Guided/Semi-Structured Interviews of 33 subjects on natural supports strategies and barriers to schools and voc. service agencies.

Definition of Concept: "Natural sources of support include an individual's network of family and friends, and an employee's employers and co-workers on the job. Such natural supports may occur spontaneously or through human service facilitation or consultations" (p.110).

Source/Title: Lee, M., Storey, K., Anderson , J.L., Goetz, L., & Zivolich, S. (1997) -- *The effect of mentoring versus job coach instruction on integration in supported employment settings.*

Design: Observational study/assessment of interactions of 30 workers in different training conditions (10 Job Coach; 10 Mgr- Mentor; 10 Co-worker & Mgr)

Definition of Concept: "Natural Supports refers to the utilization of coworkers from the onset of placement to train and support workers with disabilities throughout their employment period. Basically, this approach utilizes supports and strategies that are inherent to the particular work environment such as coworkers, supervisors, and managers. Support may involve continuing skill training, social skills training, crisis intervention, advocacy, community skill training, validating instructional strategies, collecting subjective evaluations, collecting social comparison information, job modifications, and adaptations" (p.152).

Source/Title: Mank, D., Cioffi, A., & Yovanoff, P. (1997) -- Analysis of the typicalness of supported employment jobs, natural supports, and wage and integration outcomes.

Design: Demographic data on 462 subjects in 13 vocational programs across 8 states; data supplied by support persons.

Definition of Concept: "The focus on natural supports emphasizes the participation of supervisors and co-workers in the hiring, training and supervising supported employees. The concept of natural supports underscores an understanding of worksite culture that, in turn, dictates what is "natural" or "typical" for that particular situation" (p. 185).

Source/Title: Rogan, P., Hagner, D., & Murphy, S. (1993) - *Natural Supports: Reconceptualizing job coach roles.*

Design: Four case examples to illustrate provider strategies used to promote non-intrusive supports.

Definition of Concept: "The term 'natural supports' has evolved to signify the involvement of worksite per-sonnel and others in providing support to employees with disabilities. Natural supports may be described as any assistance, relationships, or interactions that allow a person to secure, maintain, and advance in a community job of his or her choosing in ways that correspond to the typical work routines and social actions of other employees and that enhance the individual's social relationships." "natural flow of worksite rather than impose human service facilitat(ed) as both a process and an outcome role of job coaches facilitation and consultation" (p.275).

Source/Title: Storey, K., & Certo, N.J. (1996) -- *Natural supports for increasing integration in the workplace for people with disabilities: A review of the literature and guidelines for implementation*

(continued)

Design: Review Article

Definition of Concept: "Natural supports are people who are not disability service providers but who provide assistance, feedback, contact or companionship to enable people with disabilities to participate independently, or partially independently, in integrated employment settings or other community settings. Typically, individuals providing natural supports receive assistance and consultive support from disability service providers and provide natural supports with or without compensation (School and human service agency staff typically facilitate) natural support relationship(s). Natural support people are usually endemic to a job, a community environment, or community activity" (p.63).

Source/Title: Unger, D., Parent, W., Gibson, K., Kane-Jonston, K. & Kregel, J. (1997) -- *An analysis of the activities of employment specialist in a natural support approach to supported employment.*

Design: Survey of 36 individuals placed into SE by the VCU-RRTC natural supports project. Used community and workplace supports form.

Definition of Concept: "Professional literature suggests that the role of the employment specialist when using natural supports is to serve as a consultant or facilitator to the employer by building on supports which exist in the workplace, as well as the expertise of the employer" (p.111).

Sourct/Title: West, M.D., Kregel, J., Hernandez, A., & Hock, T. (1997) -- *Everybody's doing it: A national study of the use of natural supports in supported employment.*

Design: Survey of 385 Supported Employment Provider Agencies on use of natural supports in time-limited and extended services.

Definition of Concept: (Cite from S. Rep. No. 357, 1992)" 'Natural supports within the VR service context were intended to include: (a) individuals at the job site, such as employers, supervisors, or co-workers. (b) friends or family members in supportive roles; and (c) volunteers or members from work or the community.'"

"The term natural supports refers to the resources inherent in community environments that can be used for habilitative and supportive purposes."

"Recently, several writers in the field have further broadened the context to include other types of community and workplace resources, such as employee assistance programs, transportation providers, community service organizations, recreational and social associations, and governmental supports that are not limited to persons with disabilities such as subsidized housing, income tax assistance" (p.175).

The discussion of natural supports found in these articles varies a great deal in terms of how specific each author is about what constitutes natural supports. Probably the least specific definition, provided by Hagner and associates (1995), simply enumerates those who constitute natural supports: "an individual's network of family and friends, and an employee's employers and co-workers on the job." (p.32). At the other end of the spectrum, Lee and associates (1997) specify not only by whom and how, but also when natural supports are created: "Natural supports refers to the utilization of co-workers from the onset of placement to train and support workers with disabilities throughout their employment period...Supports and strategies that are inherent to a particular work environment such

as co-workers, supervisors and managers...It may involve continuing skills training, social skills training…advocacy…job modifications and adaptations" (p.152). The obvious merits of this definition lie in its specificity about who, where, when and in several instances, how natural supports are to be effected.

Looking at all of the articles, it becomes clear that a testable and measurable definition is not easily found. However, these different efforts do help us in understanding (1) who is involved with natural supports, (2) in what settings natural supports are found, and (3) the kinds of activities or features that constitute natural supports. Let us begin with the question of what parties or persons we might associate with natural supports.

The co-worker is the most commonly reoccurring figure in discussions of natural supports, appearing in almost every definition (Fabian, et al., 1993; Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Hagner, et al., 1995; Lee, et al., 1997; Mank, et al., 1997; Rogan, Hagner & Murphy, 1993; West, et al., 1997). In those instances in which the co-worker is not explicitly mentioned in conjunction with natural supports, the employer is mentioned (Storey & Certo, 1996; Unger, et al., 1997). There is a high degree of consensus that natural supports involve those individuals in the employee's work environment.

When the job coach is considered, however, there is less consensus. According to several authors, the job coach and/or provider agency has an important role in developing and maintaining natural supports for the duration of employment (Brooke, Wehman, Inge & Parent, 1995; Rogan, et al., 1993; Storey & Certo, 1996; West, et al., 1997; Unger, et al., 1997). According to these authors, the role of a job coach is to facilitate natural supports. While this does not imply that job coaches are natural supports, it does not rule them out from acting as such. Other authors; however, view job coaches as wholly exogenous to natural supports.

The notable example is Storey and Certo (1996), who seem to exclude job coaches in their definition: "Natural supports are people who are not disability service providers" (p.63). Occupying the middle ground on the issue of job coaches and unpaid natural supports, Fabian and associates (1993) seem to suggest that the job coach will fade out of the natural supports process in time: "Natural workplace support approaches require more intensive efforts up front to link the employee to available supports since the approach does not rely on the continuing presence of the job coach" (p.31). To the extent that the concept of natural supports is extended beyond the workplace or worksite, other parties may be involved in natural supports as well, including friends, families, and community members (Hagner et al., 1995; West, et al., 1997). This introduces the next topic of where natural supports are to be found.

According to most authors, the setting for natural supports seems to occur largely or exclusively in the workplace (Fabian, et al., 1993; Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Lee, et al., 1997; Mank, et al., 1997; Rogan, et al., 1993). Some authors talk about natural supports in terms of being "inherent" "typical" or "endemic" to the workplace (Lee, et al., 1997; Mank et al., 1997; Rogan; 1993; Storey & Certo, 1996; West, et al., 1997). A different perspective seems to be articulated by authors who mention "promoted" or facilitated natural supports (Fabian, et al., 1993; Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Unger, et al., 1997). A third possibility is that natural supports can be both "spontaneous" and/or "facilitated" (Hagner, et al., 1995). Perhaps a better way of conceptualizing natural supports, as it straddles the workplace and other locations, is as a network reaching to and from the workplace, with the employee's job prospects, performance and career progress at the center.

This leads us to the critical activities, such as social networks, that constitute natural supports

(Hagner, et al., 1995; Rogan, et al., 1993; Storey & Certo, 1996). In the community, natural supports may include such diverse elements as transportation, government subsidies and funding, and recreation and companionship (Storey & Certo, 1996; West, et al., 1997). In the workplace, natural supports may also include static features such as "environmental cues" or processes such as skills training of various types, employee assistance programs, job modification and adaptations (Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Lee, et al., 1997; West, et al., 1997).

Considered as a whole, these articles still leave unanswered some fundamental questions. For example, what are the implications of our current understanding of natural supports for future research and practice? How are natural supports related to the larger topic of supported employment? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in the next section on what the research literature tells us about natural supports.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH LITERATURE TELL US ABOUT NATURAL SUPPORTS?

Test and Wood (1996a) reviewed procedural information and supports literature. Each of the 15 studies identified contained a specifically stated purpose; one third of which (5) involved case studies (Fabian, Edelman, & Leedy, 1993; Hagner & Farris, 1994; Rogan, et al, 1993; Shafer, Tait, Keen & Jesiolowski, 1989; West & Parent, 1995). There were also two surveys designed to describe the current status of natural supports (Hagner, Butterworth, & Keith, 1995; Peterson, 1995), and two which provided objective data on co-worker involvement (Rusch, Johnson, & Hughes, 1990; Rusch, Hughes, Johnson, & Minch, 1991). Test and Wood (1996a) provided a detailed table showing the design and results of the 15 studies conducted. **It is noteworthy that less than 100 subjects were included in all of these studies.**

As noted earlier, there is very limited research designed to determine functional variables in supported employment as a whole therefore, it is not surprising that research does not exist within the area of natural supports strategies, unfortunately leaving supported employment vulnerable to anyone who calls what he is doing "supported employment". In others words, if someone says she is doing supported employment, then it must be supported employment. This same situation can be applied to natural supports strategies.

Additional research on natural supports strategies and related outcomes is clearly needed. Many strategies have been suggested (e.g., Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Rogan et al., 1993; Shafer, Tait, Kee & Jesiolowski, 1989), only one study was found that investigated a specific strategy suggested by the literature, paid co-worker supports (Hood, et al., 1996). Research is needed to determine what strategies based on the concept of natural supports lead to improved consumer outcomes. Studies investigating procedures should include descriptions of subjects, replicable procedures, research methodology descriptions, and specific intervention times.

One recently published major study (West, Kregel, Hernandez, and Hock 1997), reported findings from a survey of 385 supported employment provider agencies on their use of natural supports in time-limited and extended services. This study provided a large scale descriptive analysis of what practices community rehabilitation providers are following in natural supports. An overwhelming majority, 85% of all respondents, reported that their agencies emphasize natural supports in delivering supported employment services and that these supports have been

successful and useful for all individuals on their caseloads. Among the problems identified by the respondents were resistance to natural supports by employers and co-workers, as well as difficulty in locating natural supports at the job site.

Those agencies that emphasized natural supports reported that they have used co-workers or supervisors for initial training for an average of 41.5% of their consumers; for ongoing monitoring and support, this percentage increased to over half (56.3%) of their consumers. Natural supports appear to be used far less frequently in job development and placement, although the family-and-friends network is the typical avenue for early employment experiences for most people starting out in the work world.

The findings of West, Kregel, Hernandez, & Hock (1997) give clear and powerful support to the arguments made earlier relating to the lack of a clear and concise definition of natural supports. When 85% of all programs indicate that they "emphasize the use of natural supports" in service delivery, the distinction between natural supports and job coaching is no longer meaningful. Most programs are using components from a number of different supported employment models in the design and delivery of services. Natural support strategies have become established as one of these components.

Provider agencies seem to agree about what constitutes a natural support. However, the natural supports being used by supported employment agencies appear to be limited in scope. When local programs describe their use of natural supports, they are almost always talking about the involvement of co-workers in the provision of job skill training or ongoing monitoring. Programs are far less likely to describe efforts at involving employer resources (i.e., employee assistance programs), family members or friends, consumer resources, or community involvement (e.g. civic groups, professional organizations, churches, etc.) in the natural support effort. In addition, most programs seem familiar with using natural support strategies during the training and follow-along stages of supported employment. Natural supports are used far less frequently during the consumer assessment, job development, and job placement phases of supported employment.

The findings of the West, et al. (1997) survey point to the potential impact of natural support methodologies on service access for persons needing supported employment. An encouraging finding is that better than eight of ten respondents indicated that they had found natural supports to be useful and relevant for all members of their caseload, presumably including those who are the most difficult to place, train, and maintain in employment. Among those reporting to the contrary, the primary reason was based on the characteristics of the employment settings into which individuals were being placed, not on the types of individuals served. Among the reported instances where natural supports did not "work", factors included fast-paced or high stress jobs or environments, highly competitive businesses, and workplaces that weren't particularly friendly to any worker, disabled or not.

Most programs felt that the use of natural supports had contributed to the overall success of their supported employment programs. However, about two-thirds of the programs using natural supports indicated that they had experienced problems in the implementation of natural support strategies. These problems overwhelmingly fell into two areas. First, employers were unwilling to implement the natural support strategies recommended by the supported employment program and were "resisting" the notion that they should assume sole responsibility for the training, supervision, and support of the employee with a disability. Second, local programs were having a difficult time identifying potential staff members with the skills necessary

to implement natural support strategies, as well as providing training to current staff members in the use of natural support techniques.

Taken in total, the perceptions of the respondents clearly illustrate the changing nature of supported employment service delivery. Natural supports have become interwoven with all facets of supported employment implementation that it is no longer relevant to discuss the efficacy of natural supports versus the success of the job coach model of supported employment. It is no longer helpful to criticize natural support programs that place individuals into situations without providing sufficient support to enable the individual to retain employment for an extended period of time, or to chastise job coach programs that create unnecessary employer dependence on the presence and assistance of the job coach. Instead, it is now time to focus our energies on identifying those program characteristics that contribute to a program's ability to generate high quality, satisfying employment outcomes for individuals, regardless of the philosophical orientation of the program.

At the level of the local supported employment program, there are really no longer "pure" natural support programs or job coach programs. In reality, most local supported employment programs use a variety of different service delivery techniques. Far more important is the recognition that some supported employment programs are far more successful than others in terms of their ability to generate high quality employment outcomes for the consumer receiving services. Numerous factors con-tribute to individuals in supported employment earning higher wages, retaining their jobs for longer periods of time, experiencing larger degrees of integration in the work setting, and expressing greater satisfaction with their job is a complex activity. Understanding these factors is a complex activity involving a close examination of the demographic and functional characteristics of the consumers, the characteristics of the service program, and the monetary and non-monetary outcomes experienced by the individual consumer.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF NATURAL SUPPORTS

The clinical implications of natural supports are not new. In the early 1980s, Wehman (1981) talked of the critical role of coworkers and supervisors in job retention and job training. Seven years later Nisbet and Hagner (1988) introduced a broadening of the team as natural supports. As the previous analysis shows, since then there has been a plethora of papers discussing this topic as well as books (e.g., (Natural Supports in Action), DiLeo, Luecking, and Hathaway, 1995)

But in the end, several points are clear. First, many persons with truly significant disabilities may need some rehabilitation support and assistance at different points in their employment tenure. This support may be a guidance role, a consultant role, or more of a facilitator than job trainer, but typically there will need to be some support and assistance. If people with severe disabilities such as autism, quadriplegia, or severe mental retardation did not need some extra support, they would have already been competitively employed in large numbers over the past several decades. Clearly, this has not been the case.

Secondly, there will be different roles for those involved in employee support. This is not a case of one size fits all. We now know definitely that people with varying functional, learning, and physical characteristics will need different levels and intensity of supports. The qualitative nature of what supports are provided will be defined by the care with which a job

placement and subsequent job analysis is performed. This has implica-tions for hiring employment specialists who have diverse backgrounds and clinical expenses.

The third point we have learned is that effective supports, whether they are "natural" or more intrusive, must be maintained long term. People with disabilities who participate in supported employment still fall out of their jobs too quickly and too easily defeat the whole purpose of supports.

Table 2 on page 226 provides a concise listing of questions and answers associated with many of the clinically related natural support issues. We have conceptualized these issues more in the context of workplace supports.

It is noteworthy to observe that the vast majority of employers view the job coach as a positive presence within the work place, as opposed to an intrusive or disruptive influence.

The clear message from them is that they want the job coach to be immediately accessible and responsive to their needs (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Petty & Fussell, 1997). Denying employers the opportunity to hire individuals, because they need more assistance and support than the employers themselves can provide does a disservice to the individuals and the employers.

It makes little sense to continually discuss the pros and cons of job coaches versus support facilitators. The "job coach" model has contributed substantially to more than 139,000 (Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998) individuals gaining and retaining competitive employment. Efforts are only now underway to fully determine the effectiveness of natural support approaches. Yet, neither approach has been particularly effective in allowing individuals with significant cognitive disabilities to participate in competitive employment, and neither has fully encouraged consumers to choose their jobs and plan their careers. Framing the argument in an "either/or" manner trivializes our real problems and hides the fact that supported employment needs to move beyond all current models. We must identify new strategies that empower consumers and enable all individuals with significant disabilities to benefit from employment.

The problems facing supported employment are challenging and very real. Our nation's system of segregated day programs remains firmly entrenched (Braddock, 1998). Millions of individuals continue to be denied access to high quality employment programs that would enable them to take charge over their careers. The ADA continues to be assailed as an "unfunded federal mandate" that places burdensome constraints on well-meaning businesses. Finding solutions to these challenges will require a renewal of the spirit of innovation and risk-taking that has been a defining characteristic of supported employment since its inception.

Support strategies must be developed that enable people with disabilities to direct their own careers and obtain jobs of their choice. To do that, the best components of the job coach model and natural support strategies must be combined, complemented as needed by assistive technology, person-centered planning, compensatory strategies, personal assistant services, and many other strategies and approaches.

TABLE 2

1. Have natural supports changed the concept of supported employment?

NO -- The basic premise on which supported employment was established has not changed, however it has expanded to include new service technologies. People with disabilities want to work in real jobs, and supported employment offers the means for achieving this goal. No support strategy or methodology, regardless of how good it sounds, should compromise the values on which this vocational model was based. Individuals have the right to be employed by community businesses where they earn comparable wages, work side-by-side with thier co-workers, and experience all of the same benefits as other employees of the company. Most importantly, they must be able to choose the characteristics of their jobs, as well as the community and workplace supports that will assist them in maintaining employment.

2. Can using workplace supports facilitate consumer choice?

YES -- The evolution of supported employment into a consumer-driven approach with opportunities for choice from an endless selection of support options is the next logical step to improve an established and successful service modality. Use of community and workplace supports puts consumers in the "driver's seat", allowing them to direct their careers and choose the type and amount of assistance they want to receive.

3. Can natural supports eliminate the need for job coaches?

NO -- As supported employment evolves to incorporate consumer choice initiatives and a variety of new support technologies, the job coaches' role becomes even more critical. It is evident that community and workplace supports do not automatically meet the needs of individuals with severe disabilities. The job coach is the one constant person who possesses the skills to identify and develop support resources, assist with accessing services, evaluate the effectiveness, and arrange alternative provisions as need arises. Consumers should choose who will assist them, how assistance will be provided, and be able to change their minds, while maintaining a "circle of support" from job coaches who are available to orchestrate or provide the desired support.

4. Will consumers' needs for workplace supports differ?

YES -- Each consumer needs different types of assistance, as well as varying levels of support at different times in the employment process. For example, an individual with extensive job site training needs may choose to have: a co-worker teach one task; the job coach teach another; the parents arrange transportation; the rehabilitation counselor purchase uniforms; a friend assist with managing her paycheck; a cateteria worker support her during lunch breaks; the supervisor monitor work performance, and a social security consultant assist with writing a PASS plan. The management of these many support resources is a function which falls naturally within the parameters of a job coach's role.

5. Can't consumers access community and workplace supports on their own?

NO -- Taking advantage of the support resources that are available in the workplace does not occur automatically for people with severe disabilities. Just because a support exists does not mean that a consumer will access or benefit from its use. It is not uncommon for an individual to be unaware of potential supports that are available, how to choose among the alternatives, or how to access a desired support. A critical factor in the use of a variety of options is the role of the job coach who assists the consumer in identifying, choosing, and accessing needed supports at whatever level of assistance he or she prefers.

[1]Reprinted with permission from Inge (1994) Natural Supports and the Job Coach newsletter. VCU-RRTC, Richmond, VA

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