

# Ensuring Support Systems that Work: Getting Beyond the Natural Supports vs. Job Coach Controversy

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## Abstract

This article is intended to challenge the field of supported employment to enter into a new dialogue in which professionals agree that all people, regardless of life circumstances, need support systems in order to be successful. Furthermore, support systems can look vastly different from one another. The authors suggest that little benefit comes from arguing over which is better, or more cost efficient: natural supports or job coaching. An alternative approach would be to view all support strategies in a customer service and accommodation framework. The concept of customer service is discussed and suggestions for identifying person to person support strategies are provided.

Currently, in the field of supported employment for people with disabilities, there is much bantering on the subject of natural supports vs. job coach supports, and whether the presence of job coaches in the workplace hinders or enhances employment efforts (DiLeo, Luecking, & Hathaway, 1995; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Parent, Unger, Gibson, Clements, Kane, & Kregel, 1994; Test & Wood, 1997; Wehman, 1993; West, 1992). Nisbet and Hagner (1988) first proposed natural supports as an alternative concept to supported employment services. They feel that the presence of job coaches within the workplace prevents the consumer from developing relationships with coworkers and supervisors. They further suggest that job coaches stigmatize the supported employment worker and promote the idea that there is a mystique or magic to supporting workers with disabilities. Nisbet and Hagner proposed that vocational service professionals see themselves as facilitators who assist businesses rather than as providers of services. They outlined several alternative natural support models including paying coworkers for assuming the responsibilities of supervising and training workers with disabilities.

Since this original article, the concept of natural supports has been widely debated and numerous definitions have been suggested. Moon and her colleagues (Moon, Inge, Wehman, Brooke, & Barcus, 1990) defined natural supports as formal and informal mechanisms that exist in a work environment which can be used to sustain an employee's performance. Their definition further specified that these supports are not artificial or manufactured for the employee with a disability, and every workplace has some level that is offered to all employees. Examples of natural supports strategies include employee assistance programs, supervision, employee associations as well as assistance with job tasks, directional cues, job sharing, and coworker support. These authors suggested that the job coach's responsibility is to identify and facilitate these natural supports while providing assistance and support for the customer to learn his or her job duties.

More recently, DiLeo, Luecking, and Hathaway (1995) defined natural supports as having two key features. The first feature is to assist the employer in facilitating, enhancing, or expanding the existing strategies and resources for supporting and accommodating the employee with a disability. The second is to assist the supported employee in receiving ongoing support from coworkers while becoming a valued member of the workforce. The role of the job coach is seen primarily as a facilitator or technical assistance provider. In other words, the "preexisting support mechanisms natural to the work setting are maximized [while] human service interventions artificial to the work setting are minimized."

Parent and her colleagues (Parent et al., 1994) described natural supports as an array of community and workplace support options. They view the job coach's role as one of assisting the customer to identify, develop, and access support resources or services; to evaluate the effectiveness of the supports; and to arrange

alternative provisions as the need arises. The customer ultimately chooses who will provide assistance in accessing the community and workplace supports, and how the assistance will be provided. In other words, these authors consider that natural supports are a part of supported employment rather than a separate concept.

Much of the confusion and misunderstanding around natural supports and supported employment occurs when professionals view these ideas as opposing or separate concepts. The natural support literature often points to poor supported employment outcomes and the inability of job coaches to fade from job sites as reasons for implementing natural support strategies (Test & Wood, 1996). For instance, Murphy and Rogan (1996) criticize "traditional" supported employment training by saying that it leads to the exclusion of coworkers and supervisors from the training process. Hagner, 1992 also concludes that the presence of job coaches isolate supported employees from interactions with supervisors and coworkers. Unfortunately, these comments sometimes result in the conclusion that natural supports is preferred while support and training by a job coach is somehow undesirable.

However, best practices in supported employment have always called for job coaches to incorporate coworkers and supervisors into the training of the supported employee (Moon, Goodall, Barcus, & Brooke, 1986, Moon et al., 1990; Wehman, 1981). In fact, many proponents of using "natural supports" conclude that training by the job coach is necessary when the naturally occurring supports of the workplace are not sufficient to meet the needs of the worker.

***"Clearly, these efforts should not negate the fact that we have powerful training technologies that can be used"*** (Nisbet and Hagner, 1988, p.264).

***"Systematic instruction is a powerful training technology that is critical to helping people who need intensive training to learn productive work skills"*** (DiLeo et al., 1995, p.74).

Well-designed instruction which is customer-driven does not segregate individuals with severe disabilities. Rather, poor practices isolate the individual with a disability such as the job coach who fails to include the customers: the supported employee and the employer, in the design and implementation process.

Callahan (1992) suggests that good training must maintain a balance between natural validity and instructional power. Natural validity is seen as the training and support that is available in any community setting (Marc Gold & Associates, 1990). Instructional power is the amount of assistance and creativity that is necessary to teach the customer how to participate in the workplace (Gold, 1980). If use of natural supports is the only strategy considered, then individuals with the most severe disabilities will be excluded from community employment (Callahan, 1992; Wehman, 1993). If support and training by the job coach are used exclusively, then many customers will remain dependent on their coaches and ultimately never be integrated into the work culture.

This article is intended to challenge the field to enter into a new dialogue in which professionals agree that all people, regardless of life circumstances, need support systems in order to be successful. Furthermore, support systems can look vastly different from one another. The authors suggest that little benefit comes from arguing over which is better, or more cost efficient: natural supports or job coaching. An alternative approach would be to view all support strategies in a customer service and accommodation framework.

## Support Recipients

It is safe to say that all individuals have played the customer role multiple times during the course of their lives; everyone at some point is a seeker and recipient of goods and services. That common experience can provide a basis for understanding the job coach/employment specialist's role in ensuring successful participation of people with disabilities in the workforce. Employment specialists have two critical customers: job seekers/employees and employers, all of whom have unique expectations and needs.

In their book, *A Working Relationship*, Fabian, Luecking, and Tilson (1994) cite a series of focus groups that were held to determine perceptions of different stakeholders of factors leading to successful employment outcomes for people with disabilities. One cohort, comprised of people with disabilities, identified the following as a critical factor: employment specialists with expertise in career exploration, local job market, and networking. The group comprised of business people pointed to a need for assistance from professionals in the field. They identified the following activities as being essential characteristics of employment specialists: ability to deliver timely and responsive follow-up; knowledge of business needs; and ability to screen applicants to determine strong employment matches. Clearly, both of these customer groups welcomed appropriate support services

## Support Defined Generically

If Gertrude Stein was around today, she might be inclined to respond: "Support is support is support." Shakespeare, if asked, might have offered "A support by any other name would smell as sweet." The authors suggest that support of people with disabilities in the workplace consists of two important facets: customer service and accommodation.

## Customer Service

The following questions indicate the factors paramount to success in the business world: Is our customer happy with the goods and services rendered? To what extent are we assured customers will continue to do repeat business with us?

Such thinking should be adopted by professionals who work in the field of employment for people with disabilities. Are our job seeker customers satisfied with our services? Do they view our assistance as valuable? To what degree did our employer customers react to our services favorably? Do they want to continue their association with us? Do they enthusiastically endorse our services to other businesses?

The bottom line should be a high level of satisfaction with the services delivered to all of our customers. To ascertain whether or not this is being achieved, employment specialists and their organizations must continuously and stringently seek feedback from these customers (Hargrove, 1995; LeBouf, 1987). Ultimately each customer decides if the support given was:

- intrusive, disruptive, inconvenient, time-consuming, unnecessary, wasteful or

- welcome, useful, convenient, efficient, needed, resourceful.

Every individual receiving services will have a different answer to these questions; therefore, employment specialists must become seasoned consultants and be able to thoroughly understand this concept and respond accordingly. It may be that professional development bears a significant responsibility for inadequate preparation of employment specialists, particularly in the areas of consultation skills, customer service orientation, marketing, effective listening and critical observation skills, communication strategies, and performance self-appraisal (DiLeo & Langton, 1993; Bissonnette, 1994; Fabian, et al, 1994; Levinson, 1993).

Employment specialists must develop and hone a solid customer service orientation (DiLeo & Langton, 1993; Fabian, et al., 1994; Fabian & Luecking, 1991). They need to listen to each customer, determine what that individual wants, assess his/her current situation, and decide what can be offered in the way of assistance. They must be capable of frequently soliciting feedback from their customers and modifying their support services.

## ***Accommodation***

The Oxford American Dictionary (1980) defines "accommodate" as "to provide or supply; to adapt; to make harmonize". The ADA defines "accommodation" as "any change in the work environment or in the way things are usually done that results in equal employment opportunity for an individual with a disability" (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1992, p. I-5). In a 1993 PBS special program on employment of people with disabilities (Resnick, 1993), Tilson suggested that the complexities of reasonable accommodation might be simplified using three categories:

(1) Physical Modifications and Materials

(2) Special Services

(3) People to People Action

Physical accommodations include any modifications to existing structures, adaptations to equipment, the provision of special equipment or materials, and/or assistive technology. Accommodation under the "Special Services" category would include interpreters, readers, job coaches, personal care attendants, service animals, etc. These two categories of accommodation are the most easily understood and often the most easily provided, although they can be the most costly.

The third category of accommodation is difficult to name; the authors have called it "people to people action." This is the largest of the accommodation categories. In point of fact, the majority of accommodation strategies fall into this category. Furthermore, this category tends to represent supports that are the least expensive. Table 1 on the following page details an array of "people to people" accommodations. The reader will undoubtedly recognize these as examples of what the field calls natural cues, natural contingencies and reinforcement, compensatory strategies, self-management strategies, among others.

## **Roles of the Employment Specialist**

Brooke, Wehman, Inge, and Parent (1995) outline several roles for employment specialists using a customer-

driven approach to supported employment. These include the planner, consultant, technician, and community resource roles. While the authors detail the functions for assisting the employee as the customer, these roles also are applicable to the employer as the customer. For instance, when assuming a planner role, the employment specialist works with the job seeker and the employer to identify and analyze the supports and services that are available within the workplace. Simultaneously, the employment specialist, acting as a community resource, is identifying supports and services in the community such as transportation options, independent living supports, assistive technology resources, and so forth. Once these supports and resources are identified, the employment specialist can serve as a consultant to the employee and the employer recommending various strategies based on his/her knowledge and expertise. The customers can then decide which supports and resources are desired.

Table 1

People to People Action Strategies

Strategy	Example
Self-monitoring	<p><b>Customer has difficulty completing work within a specified time period.</b></p> <p>Customer uses a timer and a chart to monitor how long it takes to complete a specific job duty. Feedback from the chart assists the worker in meeting the job expectations.</p>
Picture Cue	<p><b>Customer has difficulty discriminating between work supplies.</b></p> <p>Tape a picture of the work task on each container.</p>
Reinforcement	<p><b>Customer has difficulty meeting production standard.</b></p> <p>Provide feedback hourly and ask employee to assist with greeting restaurant patrons if a pre-agreed upon amount of work has been completed.</p>
Pre-taped instructions	<p><b>Customer has difficulty reading copy requests to determine work assignments.</b></p> <p>Tape record instructions for copy requests.</p>

<b>Visual Cue</b>	<b>Customer has difficulty remembering when to re-stock the condiment bar.</b>  Place a piece of colored tape on the inside of the condiment bar as a visual reminder.
<b>Auditory Cue</b>	<b>Customer has difficulty taking breaks on time.</b>  Customer uses a pre-programmed wrist watch.

During the initial employment period, the employment specialist may assume the technician/ trainer role by assisting the employee to learn his or her job duties. This may be necessary for new employees who have a large gap between their current skills and the skills required for the position. The "trick" is to provide sufficient support to the customer in order for him/her to learn the identified skills while including the supervisors and coworkers in the development and implementation of the plan. Skillful employment specialists are aware that they need a systematic strategy for fading from the workplace beginning the first day of a job-site training program.

Clearly, at any time, the employer or coworkers can and should assume any of the above identified roles. For instance, coworkers are usually excellent consultants when the employment specialist is developing task analyses, identifying natural cues and supports, and designing strategies for the new employee to be successful in the work-place. Or, a coworker may assume the responsibility for training the new employee to complete a specific job duty. The employee, employer, and employment specialist must decide together who will assume which roles and when. Most likely, a team approach will result in the best outcomes for all customers.

## Identifying Supports

Typically, employees as customers will need assistance identifying supports within the work-place regardless of who provides that assistance: the employment specialist, coworkers, the supervisor. A company may have varying levels of resource options from which to choose; however, the worker may not know how to access or benefit from their use. He/she may be unaware of a potential support, how to choose among the support alternatives, or how to access a desired resource (Parent et al., 1995). The following questions and answers offers some points to consider when facilitating people to people action.

### ***What are the possible support options?***

There could be many different ways to approach the same support need such as: a) using a coworker mentor to assist the customer in responding to a natural cue to increase his/her production; b) asking a supervisor to assist the customer in monitoring his/her work production; or c) having an employment specialist train the customer to monitor his/her production using a self-management program. The employment specialist with the assistance of the employee and employer should identify and review all of the different support strategies and options before a support is selected. Table 2 on the following page provides several different "people to people" solutions that could be useful for an individual who is having difficulty remembering his job duty schedule.

There may not be any one "best" solution to a support need. When selecting between the people to people options, the employment specialist and his/her customers should decide 1) which strategy or strategies is/are acceptable to the employee and employer, 2) which one matches the learning style of the employee, and 3) which one allows the employee to be as independent as possible. The team should begin with the least intrusive or most natural options before trying more intrusive strategies. In the Table 2 example, the most natural options would be for the coworkers or supervisor to praise the worker for a job well done and remind him if he had skipped an area of the store. However, a more intrusive choice such as self-instruction or a compensatory strategy would be needed if the employee did not respond to the naturally occurring reinforcement and contingencies.

***What are the customers' choices?***

The employment specialist should not assume that supports will be provided by the employer or coworkers for all of the worker's needs. The employer's and/or coworkers level of comfort with supplying the identified support should be determined. In addition, does the worker want the employer or coworker assisting with a particular support? For instance, a customer may be hesitant to ask a stranger for personal care support such as eating, and coworkers also may feel uncomfortable providing the support. However, as relationships develop in the workplace, this people to people assistance usually will evolve naturally. Initially, the employment specialist can facilitate this by asking coworkers to eat lunch with the customer and modeling how to provide support. Other individuals facing the same situation may choose to hire a personal assistant while still others may choose to forego eating during work hours.

***Which strategies match the learning style or needs of the employee?***

While there may be many support options available in the workplace, an employee will respond to any particular choice based on his/her learning style. Some individuals may respond to verbal instructions, while others need detailed demonstrations and repeated practice to learn a new job duty. For instance, a supervisor may be willing to provide support to a customer by monitoring his/her work performance at set intervals of time. However, if the customer does not respond to verbal instructions offered by the supervisor, there is a gap between the support provided and support needed.

**Table 2**

**Sample Solutions of "People to People Action"**

**Issue: Customer has difficulty remembering job duty sequence.**

Customer is responsible for vacuuming the third floor of the department store. He is having difficulty remembering to vacuum all the different departments (e.g., shoes, coats, cosmetics, and so forth) as well as finishing his other job tasks.

**Coworker feedback**

Coworker offers to check work at a specified time and remind worker if he has skipped an area of the department store.

**Self-recording using a picture book**

Job coach assists the customer in making a picture book with pages representing each section of the store and other job duties that must be completed. Customer checks off each page as the work is finished. Supervisor offers to assist the customer in keeping up with the book and making a new one as needed.

**Pre-taped instructions**

Customer uses a walkman with pre-taped message which lists the sections of the store to be vacuumed. He plays the tape if needed to double check that all work has been completed.

**Reinforcement**

Coworkers comment on completed work. ("Joe, I noticed that you did a really good job today in lady's shoes!" "You did great getting behind all the cosmetic counters.")

**Self-instruction and natural cues**

Job coach works with the customer to develop a pattern for vacuuming the department store. This pattern is developed using landmarks in the store for visual cues. The customer verbally instructs himself by saying, "First, I vacuum the area in front of the elevators. Next, I vacuum around all the cosmetic counters...etc."

In this example, the employment specialist may work with the employer and employee to determine if the supervisor needs information on how to support the individual (e.g., training in providing model vs. verbal prompts). Or, they may decide that the employee prefers for the employment specialist to assist him/her initially with learning the task. If this is the selected option, the employment specialist must be conscious of fading support to the supervisor as quickly as possible.



### ***Which support option results in or promotes independence?***

Would the identified support create dependence on coworkers when independence should be the goal? Dependence on coworkers to provide support to the employee may be as intrusive as creating dependence on the employment specialist. Situations may occur when coworkers are not available to assist the customer with an identified support, and high turnover may result in a breakdown of the support system.

For instance, one individual was having difficulty punching in at the beginning and end of his work shift. He was unable to select his time card, since he could not recognize or remember his social security number. The employment specialist decided that a coworker should be assigned to assist the individual in locating the card and punching in or out. Although the employer was willing to provide the support, this particular idea creates dependence on the coworkers.

While every worker needs to rely on coworkers for some assistance and support, employment specialists should not create situations that perpetuate learned helplessness. In this instance, a color cue added to the timecard may result in the worker learning to select it independently; he may learn to place the card in a particular location; or he may learn to match the social security number on the timecard to a cue card that he keeps in his pocket. A coworker might assist by placing the color cue on the card, by checking to see that the individual successfully keeps it in the specified location, or by making sure that the worker has his cue card. The individual would have responsibility for independently completing the task while receiving support from his coworkers.

### ***Designing a People to People Support "Package"***

Once all of the available supports have been identified, the employee, employer, and employment specialist can select a support strategy. In most instances, a combination of strategies will be needed to promote employment success. This combination of supports may include coworker support, employment specialist training, identification of natural cues in the environment, reinforcement, compensatory strategies, assistive technology devices, and so forth. Any member on the support team: the employer, coworkers, supervisor, employment specialist, family member, can be the leader in identifying and/or providing the support. In one situation, the coworker may be the person who identifies a natural cue that will assist the worker, while the employment specialist provides the training on the job duty. In another instance, the employment specialist may be the one who identifies an assistive technology device, while the coworker takes the lead on making sure that the device remains operational and available to the customer. Table 3 on the following page provides a case study example of a people to people support package.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

The argument over "natural supports vs. job coach supports" is only as useful as the actual services received by our customers. Perhaps more of our professional energies should be spent determining 1) which supports meet the needs of our customers; 2) whether our customers are satisfied with the support provided; and 3) what more can we do to ensure their satisfaction? One only needs to delve into the business literature to ascertain that business is obsessed with such themes as dialoguing with customers and ensuring the quality of the product. The business world depends on employees who understand these concepts, and the field of employment for people with disabilities must emulate the business world in this area.

This article has attempted to provide a context within which supports can be identified and selected for supported employment customers. The authors propose looking at workplace supports within a customer service and accommodation framework which recognizes that all individuals regardless of abilities will need support systems in order to be successful. Perhaps, the question is not: "is the support provided natural?" Rather the question should be "is the support effective and are our customers satisfied?"

Table 3

Support Case Study

<p><b>Customer is hired to enter names into company mailing list..</b></p> <p><b>Challenges:</b> Ø learning how to use the data entry program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ physically manipulating the work materials</li><li>○ meeting the production standard</li></ul>	
<p><b>Customer needs to enter addresses using a computer.</b></p>	
<p><b>1. Accommodations</b></p> <p><b>(low technology devices)</b></p>	<p>Job coach works with supervisor and customer to modify the work space. Job coach finds a work table which is accessible for customer. Work site pays for table. Job coach gets blocks to raise the table to adequate work height. Customer brings headpointer to work to use for data entry.</p>

<b>2. Instruction</b>  <b>(Time delay)</b>	Job coach and coworker develop task analysis for data entry. Customer, supervisor, and job coach decide that the job coach will assist the customer in learning the data entry program using a time delay strategy with a verbal prompt. Job coach carefully fades assistance using the time delay strategy.
<b>3. Color Cue</b>	Customer and job coach discuss mistakes in data entry. Customer is having difficulty distinguishing I vs. l. The job coach uses a pink and green highlighter pin to add a color cue. This cue is faded as customer begins to distinguish the letters.
<b>Customer needs to use the telephone to buzz supervisor for assistance.</b>	
<b>1. Accommodations</b>  <b>(low technology device))</b>	Job coach brainstorms with the supervisor and employee how the customer will contact the supervisor when assistance is needed. Job coach identifies a device to hold the telephone receiver. Supervisor provides money to pay for device.
<b>2. Coworker assistance</b>	Coworker offers to check to make sure phone is in the device at the beginning of the work day.
<b>Customer needs a way to manipulate the paper with names for data entry.</b>	
<b>1. Specialized accommodation</b>	Rehabilitation counselor provides funding for rehabilitation engineer to develop a work stand and paper holding device.
<b>2. Coworker assistance</b>	Coworker offers to place pages on device at the beginning of the work day. She also offers to enlarge the type on the pages on the copy machine so that it is easier for customer to read.
<b>3. Instruction</b>	Customer, job coach, and supervisor discuss training on device. Customer decides that job coach will develop a task analysis and train her to use device.

Customer needs to increase data entry speed.	
1. Self-monitoring	Supervisor, customer, and job coach discuss the need for increased production. Job coach obtains a timer and records customer's data entry speed. He pre-sets the timer for a faster time. Customer uses the timer to monitor data entry speed.
2. Reinforcement	Coworker offers to check on the customer and praise when she notices that customer is meeting the time requirement.

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