

Customized Employment Corner

Identifying job opportunities for individuals with disabilities

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New job developers and employment specialists often ask for the secret “recipe” for finding jobs for individuals with disabilities. This is particularly true when trying to locate jobs for individuals with the most significant disabilities. When a seasoned job developer or employment specialist is asked if finding jobs for individuals with significant disabilities is an “art or a science”, the reply most likely will be “it is both an art and a science.” While there is no magic formula for negotiating customized employment positions, there are some basic principles and steps that are helpful to follow.

The first step in customizing opportunities for individuals with disabilities includes knowing the interests and skills of the job seekers. This process is called person-centered planning as well as the “discovery” process and should include spending time with an individual in multiple settings. These settings could include work as well as leisure and home environments to ensure that the employment specialist learns what is important to the individual.

The next step is being able to identify with employers the specific needs of the workplace. This requires that employment specialists be able to recognize “the possibilities” where job descriptions do not already exist. In other words, the employment specialist must analyze a company’s labor needs and negotiate with the business to create a job that did not exist prior to a job site analysis.

Bissonnette [1] described the development of an employment proposal for job creation. She used the term to refer to the process of matching the skills and abilities of individuals with disabilities with the needs of business. Bissonnette stated that there are two types of job creation: applicant-focused and employer focused. Indeed the two are interdependent. Without a labor market need, jobs could not be negotiated or customized for individuals with disabilities who have skills and abilities to bring to the workplace. The following questions and answers provide information on how to negotiate customized jobs with employers.

1. Question: What does negotiation mean?

Answer: Some people think that negotiation means persuading other people to accept their point of view. For example, when someone haggles with a car salesperson and obtains the best deal, we might say, “Gee, she’s a great negotiator.” However, negotiation is not about using intimidation, getting your own way, or giving in. That is what happens when people fail to negotiate. One definition of negotiation is to discuss with the goal of finding a mutually acceptable agreement. The goal of customized employment negotiations is “real work” for competitive wages in a community business.

Negotiations with employers to identify a job of choice for an individual with disabilities might include a number of different approaches. A negotiator, such as the job developer or employment specialist, might work with an employer to create a new position through

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job restructuring that matches the job seeker's interests and abilities. Another negotiation strategy might involve making changes to various aspects of existing jobs, such as allowing an employee to work different schedules or change the way a job duty is performed. This also could include discussing the need for accommodations and other workplace supports. Employment negotiations may require compromise from those involved (i.e. the job seeker and employer) but results in a win-win situation for both.

2. Question: What are some of the basic skills needed for successful negotiations?

Answer: Negotiation is a sophisticated form of communication. Therefore, job seekers or the agency staff who support them need to become effective communicators and be able to speak in a clear and concise manner. Knowing the job seeker's abilities as well as the supports that the agency has to offer businesses, anticipating an employer's potential needs and questions in advance, and using marketing tools (i.e. brochure, educational materials, calling card) will be key to successful negotiations.

As soon as two people meet, a relational climate begins to develop. Many meanings can come from a single sentence just by shifting the emphasis from one word to another. Vocal changes also give clues. If the speaker is trying to hide fear or anger, the voice will probably sound higher or louder, and the rate of talking will be faster than normal. Sadness will produce the opposite vocal pattern, quieter, low-pitched speech delivered at a slower rate.

Negotiations require good listening skills. When meeting with an employer focus on what the other person is saying. Turn off that inner voice that may be planning the next question rather than attending to what is being said. When a person puts his or her whole attention on listening, he or she is less likely to miss important nonverbal messages such as facial expressions and voice inflections that provide valuable cues.

Checking what has been heard may also prove useful. For example, ask, "I understood you to say . . . am I correct in this?" or "I hear you saying . . . Is that how you feel?" This type of active listening encourages understanding. It also assures the other person that he or she is heard, accepted, and respected. The ability to actively listen supports open, ongoing, negotiations.

Verbal messages certainly contribute to the tone of the relationship, but many climate-shaping messages

are non-verbal. Nonverbal communication reveals attitudes and feelings. It consists of messages sent by the distance between negotiators, touch, body posture and orientation, expressions of the face and eyes, movement, vocal characteristics, clothing, and physical environment. Interpreting non-verbal messages plays an important role in reading an employer's point of view.

Employment specialists should consider the messages that they are sending through their body language. For example, sitting up straight and leaning slightly toward the person speaking shows confidence and interest. The eyes communicate another message. When someone glances toward us with the proper facial expression, a clear message of interest is sent. At the same time, when eye contact is avoided disinterest may be communicated.

3. Question: What is the best way to negotiate?

Answer: While there is no one "best" way to negotiate, there are some basic steps that can lead toward successful customized employment negotiations. Step one is to know the goal and stay focused. Remember, the goal is to come to an agreement that is mutually beneficial to both parties (job seeker and the employer).

This means beginning with a clear knowledge of the jobseeker's vocational interests, strengths, expectations, and support needs. If an employment specialist is representing the person with a disability, he or she must know the jobseeker's bottom line. This should include areas in which he or she can or cannot compromise. For instance, the job seeker may have some flexibility in the number of hours worked during the week but will not work on the weekends. Knowing the job seeker will ensure that negotiations move in the right direction from the beginning and that a job of choice for the individual is identified. Compromising on features of a job to satisfy the employer that do not meet the needs of the job seeker will not result in a mutually beneficial employment relationship.

Step two is to identify the employer's needs. Successful negotiations also require understanding the business and its operations. Time must be spent building rapport with the employers, before negotiation is attempted for a specific job seeker. Identify the company's needs and suggest possible work solutions that might resolve these needs.

One thing to remember is to not assume that what is important for one person will be the same for another. For example, one job seeker may be motivated to work

for a paycheck while wearing a work uniform motivates another. Or, one employer may be motivated to negotiate a job to save money, while another may have a job task that current employees are not completing. Remember, the end result is a mutually agreed upon job. All sides should leave the negotiation feeling satisfied.

4. Question: How can the employment specialist determine an employer's needs?

Answer: Negotiations require spending time with the employer. During this period, a relationship can be developed and needs identified. The employment specialists should encourage an employer to share thoughts and feelings by asking for feedback on what is discussed. The negotiator's responsibility is to ask questions that will uncover the employer's needs and interests that can then be matched with the needs and interests of the job seeker. If the employment specialist creates a receptive climate, he or she is more likely to establish a relationship leading to a negotiated position.

Observing business operations and asking key questions may lead to discovering opportunities for customizing a job. For example, some of the following questions may be asked. Do employees have duties that take time away from their main area of expertise? Do you routinely pay overtime or need temporary work services? Are their tasks that do not get done or that you would like to see done more often?

The employment specialist must also be ready to probe below the surface. For example, consider asking questions such as the following. What's your real need here? What values are important to your company? What's the outcome or result that you want? The answers to these and other questions can lead to cooperative problem solving. This in turn may trigger discussions about negotiating a new job.

5. Question: How does an employment specialist convince an employer that customizing a job is a good idea?

Answer: The employment specialist must be ready to listen to employers! Listen and keep listening! It's vital to really understand what employers are saying and their points of view. This shows respect and good intentions, and will make an employer feel valued.

In the process, the employment specialist should learn more about a company's needs and what may be holding them back from proceeding with negotiations. "Reading" employers and overcoming objections will be key to success. Employment specialists should become familiar with typical employer concerns and be able to address them. For example, the employer may be wondering, "Will this cost my company money? Will this agency deliver what they are promising? Will the person be able to do the job?"

Pointing out that other businesses have successfully used the service and hired individuals with disabilities may address these concerns. Ask employers who have worked with the agency if their names can be used as references. Discuss in advance with the job seeker the accommodations that will be needed and what information is to be disclosed to the employer. Know how you are going to represent the person's strengths and interests so that the employer does not have questions regarding the individual's ability to do the job that is being negotiated. Be ready and able to describe how the job seeker will be a valued employee to the company.

Reference

- [1] D. Bissonnette, *Beyond Traditional Job Development: The Art of Creating Opportunity*, Chatsworth, CA: Milt Wright & Associates, Inc., 1994.