

Customized Employment Corner

Demystifying customized employment for individuals with significant disabilities

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A survey conducted by the Institute of Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston revealed that 70% of the individuals with disabilities served by Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) are people with developmental disabilities. The majority of these individuals are not working in the community. They are in facility-based non-work and work programs including those that pay less than minimum wages through 14 c Special Wage Certificates.

There are many reasons that community employment has not been the outcome for individuals with significant disabilities. One reason that is often mentioned is that these individuals usually do not qualify for most of the jobs that are available in the community. In fact, individuals with significant disabilities often are not able to complete all the essential functions associated with existing job openings. Employment specialists or personal representatives who rely on locating positions by using traditional sources (e.g., classified ads, postings on job boards, Internet sites) may become frustrated and discouraged when they cannot find jobs for their customers. Unfortunately, they may conclude that individuals with significant disabilities are not “qualified” applicants for competitive employment positions.

An approach to finding community jobs for individuals with significant disabilities that has proven to be successful is customized employment. Customized employment begins with an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the job candidate with a disability. Support and input can be provided by an employment specialist, family mem-

bers, and significant others. Once the individual’s job goals are established, potential businesses can be identified by networking with family, friends, and neighbors, contacting local business associations such as the Chamber of Commerce, reading the business section of the local paper, and using knowledge of the local job market. Employers targeted on behalf of the individual should be selected based on a match between the job seeker’s expressed interests, skills, and type or nature of work performed at the company.

This customized approach to employment allows for the job seeker and the employment specialist to negotiate job duties that match the individual’s skills. In other words, the approach results in a negotiated position for which the individual with a significant disability is qualified. The following questions and answers should provide additional insight into how customized employment can lead to integrated employment outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities.

QUESTION: How can I convince an employer to hire an individual with a significant disability?

ANSWER: Employment specialists must believe that individuals with significant disabilities can make valuable contributions to businesses. If the employment specialist is convinced that the individual can enhance the company’s operations, then he or she will be able to represent the job seeker successfully! Customizing a job for an individual with significant disabilities requires spending time with employers. The negotiator’s

responsibility is to ask questions that will uncover the company's needs that sometimes are not recognized by the employer, which can be matched with the needs and interests of the job seeker with a significant disability. The next step is to develop a proposal for presenting to the employer. The proposal describes the aspects of creating an individualized job that meets the business needs of the company and the employment needs of the applicant. For example, the proposal should include the tasks to be performed, accommodations, as well as the standards for work performance. For individuals with significant disabilities, this means creating a new job description for a position that is tailored to meet the unique skills and abilities of the individual. Included in the proposal should be a description of an individual's contributions such as how customizing a position can save money and time, get tasks completed that are typically not done or not done often enough, and in general enhance the company's operations. Identifying how the new employee will make a valuable contribution is the key to sealing the business deal.

QUESTION: Individuals with significant disabilities need constant supervision and prompting to complete the tasks assigned to them. Please explain how an individual with intensive support needs can become independent in a community job?

ANSWER: Many individuals with significant disabilities have never learned to monitor their performance, since staff usually does this for them. In facility-based programs or sheltered workshops, there may be no need to consider fading staff presence. This can create dependence on the trainer, and individuals with significant disabilities will wait to be prompted. Sometimes, even the physical presence of staff becomes the prompt to work. When they step away from the individual, he or she stops working. What occurs is prompt dependence on the instructor and an inability to be independent of agency staff.

One of the usual requirements of employment is the ability of the worker to perform acquired skills with minimal supervision. The use of systematic training strategies on the job is critical in order to ensure that individuals with significant disabilities learn their job duties within a reasonable amount of time. This includes guidelines and planning for fading the employment specialist's presence from the job site. Individuals must learn how to monitor their own work performance in order to be independent of the employment specialist.

Self-management is one way to involve an individual in the learning process and assist him or her in becoming independent of staff prompts and supervision. Self-management has been referred to as self-monitoring, self-recording, self-observation, self-reinforcement, self-instruction, and self-assessment. Self-management techniques may be applied before or after the work task that the individual is trying to monitor. For instance, an individual may use a pre-set alarm on his or her watch to determine when it is time to take a break. Another example may be the person who uses a picture cue book to determine what tasks need to be completed during the day. Remember that the individual will need to learn how to use whatever strategy is selected. Simply giving the materials or explaining the strategy to the individual may not result in an immediate understanding of how to self-manage work performance.

QUESTION: Can you provide an example of how someone with a significant disability learned to monitor his or her work performance without the direct on-going intervention of an employment specialist?

ANSWER: Ronald was hired by the local department store to assist with the general maintenance of one of the floors in the store. This included unpacking new merchandise and hanging it on hangers as well as vacuuming. His employment specialist helped him learn his job duties and then faded from the job site. After the employment specialist faded, Ronald began having difficulty remembering where he had vacuumed. The employer called the employment specialist and asked if she could help him do quality control, because Ronald often skipped entire departments that were assigned to him.

The employment specialist observed Ronald's performance and determined that he most likely had become prompt dependent on the employment specialist during the initial training phase. If she walked in front of Ronald, he was able to successfully locate the departments that he needed to vacuum. If she walked behind him or was out of sight, it seemed as if he did not know where to go in the store to vacuum. The employment specialist talked to Ronald, and they decided that a picture book could help.

Together, they took pictures of the various departments that he needed to vacuum (e.g. ladies' shoes, dresses, and cosmetics, etc.). These pictures were copied on a copy machine to form a booklet. Ronald carried the booklet in his pocket and referred to it to

complete his task. Once he had finished a specific department, he tore off that picture and threw it in the trash. The top picture told him where he needed to vacuum next. Ronald continued this strategy until he used all of the pages in his booklet for the day.

The employment specialist helped in the beginning by working with Ronald to learn how to use the book. She was careful to walk behind him and not inadvertently prompt him with her physical presence. This took approximately three days to complete. Next, the employment specialist provided a week's supply of booklets to the employer. Finally, the employer took over the task of copying the pictures as well as making sure that Ronald had his booklet at the beginning of each work shift. The employer also regularly spot checked Ronald's work and provided him positive feedback on a job well done. This strategy was successful in allowing Ronald to independently self-monitor his work performance without the presence of the employment specialist.

QUESTION: Isn't pre-vocational training or training in a facility-based program a pre-requisite to community employment? In other words, wouldn't it be easier for an individual with significant disabilities to learn skills before they are placed in community jobs?

ANSWER: There isn't any data that shows working in a facility-based program is a pre-requisite to community employment. There is research that shows individuals with significant disabilities have difficulty transferring or generalizing skills learned in one environment to another. Agency staff could spend time teaching a work skill such as "staying on task" in the workshop, but the person may not transfer this skill to a work setting. Time would then be needed to train the person to successfully demonstrate skills in the community business that had already been trained in the facility.

Part of the problem of transferring skills also can be related to the difficulty simulating the characteristics of a community business in the facility-based program. This could include the presence or absence of environmental conditions such as noise, amount of space, objects; customers; coworkers; and the demands of community employment. Teaching the individual to work at his or her job site of choice rather than withholding access to the community until skills are learned is the best approach.

QUESTION: Can individuals with challenging behaviors work in the community? Isn't an extended em-

ployment program or sheltered workshop better able to meet their support needs?

ANSWER: Yes, individuals with challenging behaviors can work successfully in community jobs! Some individuals may have socially inappropriate behaviors in the facility-based program but be very successful in a competitive job. The first step is to get to know the individual and his/her strengths and characteristics including the activities and tasks that the person likes or shows interest in completing. This information can be used to customize a job in a business environment that matches the individual's preferences and support needs.

This success often can be realized by customizing a position that matches the person's strengths and the characteristics of the workplace rather than focusing on "fixing" the person's behavior. The individual who uses profanity might be successful working in construction or a loading dock if that is determined to be a job of interest. Said differently, the individual who talks continually most likely would have difficulty in a position where coworkers are not allowed to talk with each other.

An important point to consider is that individuals with significant disabilities need to learn socially appropriate behaviors in the community! Staff could spend a great deal of time working to eliminate a behavior that has been identified as "inappropriate" or "challenging" at the program site. But, as soon as the person moves to a new workplace, the same behavior or a new one might occur requiring intervention and support. This relates to the difficulty that many individuals with significant disabilities have in generalizing what they learn in one setting to another. The quickest path to success is to learn skills in the setting where the person wants to work rather than requiring him or her to learn them prior to working in a community job.

QUESTION: The individual that I am thinking about usually refuses to do any work. As soon as a staff person prompts him, he tries to sit on the floor and makes loud noises. How could someone like that ever leave a community rehabilitation program?

ANSWER: Staff actually may be "teaching" the behaviors that are limiting the individual's employment outcomes. Is this intentional? Of course, not! The point is to recognize that behaviors are learned whether they are "appropriate" or "inappropriate." In addition, segregated environments sometimes have different standards

for what is socially appropriate than community businesses. For instance, individuals may be allowed to hug staff, take frequent and long breaks, or are not required to work at a steady pace or up to production standards due to their significant disabilities. Inadvertently, opportunities to demonstrate successful work behaviors are limited due to staffs' decreased expectations.

In the case of the young man who is sitting on the floor, consider the function or purpose that the behavior is serving for him. Is the person trying to get staff attention? Perhaps, he has learned that staff will interact with him if he sits on the floor. Observation of the individual and what goes on in the environment before, when, and after the behavior occurs can provide some clues on how to support the individual. The goal should be to teach the person through positive support strategies rather than through negative consequences. Try continuing to prompt the person while not providing eye contact and not commenting on his efforts to sit on the floor. Encourage and praise any participation in the activity while increasing social interaction when the person is working.

The above strategy is only one option to assisting the individual used in the example. Observation is key to designing a support strategy. This includes observation of the staff and other people that are interacting with the person with a disability as well as the individual. The function or purpose that a behavior is serving can be many and varied. This includes the possibility that the individual is communicating that he or she does not want to be in the workshop or perform the activities that are available!

Completing an analysis of how the behavior has been learned and maintained is the first step towards providing positive supports. This process can be completed in a customized community job, and the individual should not be limited to receiving services only in a facility-based program. In addition, attempting to eliminate the behaviors prior to locating a job in the community may be unnecessary. The behavior may occur at the agency but never occur in the community business.

QUESTION: Do employers and coworkers have the time to provide the needed support and supervision for an individual with a significant disability? All this sounds like a lot of work!

ANSWER: The first important point is to look for companies that provide consistent support and supervision to all workers, not just workers with disabilities. If an individual with intensive support needs is placed in a work environment where all workers receive minimal or no supervision, the person most likely will be set-up to fail. Second, look for work sites where coworkers or supervisors would be in close proximity to the worker with a significant disability. Talk with the employer about how the individual could receive positive feedback when coworkers walk past the individual's work area. Employment specialists can help by observing and determining naturally occurring times of the day when coworkers are available to provide support. As previously mentioned, the individual also needs to learn how to monitor his or her work performance. The goal is to determine how the employer and the coworkers can assist the individual from the first day of employment rather than creating dependence on the employment specialist.

SUMMARY: The key to success for supporting individuals with significant disabilities in community integrated employment settings is to implement the types of strategies and suggestions discussed in this article. Agencies that have made the commitment to customizing jobs and providing individualized supports find that they are able to serve individuals who have typically been excluded from community business settings.

Additional Resource: The National Survey of Community Rehabilitation Providers, FY2002-2003, information is available online at <http://www.t-tap.org/strategies/change/icisurvey.htm>.

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