

Customized Employment Corner

Choice and customized employment: A critical component

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Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) often report that individuals with disabilities prefer to stay in facility-based programs rather than move into “real jobs” in community businesses. Preliminary findings from a national survey of CRPs found that 70% of the respondents felt that the individuals in their subminimum wage programs prefer/choose to stay in these programs [1]. Certainly, all CRPs want to support individuals with disabilities in their job choices. However, service providers must also empower individuals with disabilities to make informed choices and promote active participation in the decision making process.

The important question to ask is whether the person with disabilities is making an informed choice to stay at the facility-based program. Has the individual had opportunities to participate in community experiences? If the person’s only work experience has been within the community rehabilitation program, then perhaps the decision is based on where he or she is comfortable. Is “fear” of the unknown preventing the person from taking a chance? Does the person associate attending the workshop with friends and fear of losing those friends keep the individual from leaving?

Or, has the person tried a community job and had a bad experience? The point is to not “blame” the person for not being successful or not wanting to leave the facility-based program. Rather, the focus is on identifying the person’s support needs that can be provided to promote success in a community job. One strategy is to learn as much as possible about the individual in order to customize a job that reflects the person’s inter-

ests and abilities. This “Customized Employment Corner” addresses some of the commonly asked questions related to empowering individuals to move from segregated facility-based programs to integrated community employment.

Question: *The individuals in our 14 (c) program earn less than minimum wage based on their production and skills. They wouldn’t be able to meet the production standards of a job in the community. If the staff ask them if they want to work in the community, wouldn’t that be setting them up for failure?*

Answer: All people regardless of the type or severity of their disabilities have unique talents and gifts to offer their communities. When supports and services are customized, individuals can obtain personal goals and work in the community earning at least minimum wage. The key is to focus on the person’s abilities and interests rather than concentrating on his or her disabilities and what he/she cannot do.

Customized employment involves getting to know the person and the unique skills and talents that he or she can bring to a community business. Once these skills, talents, and interests are identified, employers can be approached, and a customized job negotiated that is of benefit to both the job seeker and the business. Setting a production standard that matches the individual’s abilities is part of the negotiation process with an employer.

For instance, John had an interest in working at an office, making money, and being able to dress in “business” clothes. A job was negotiated for him by tak-

ing job duties from the company's receptionist that had been interfering with her answering the phone, which was her primary responsibility. She was able to more efficiently perform her essential job function once John took over the work of assembling sales binders. A production standard was set that matched John's abilities, and the employer agreed to this standard during the negotiation process. John earned minimum wage, and he got a job that he enjoyed in the community. Negotiating the job based on John's interests and abilities, developing achievable performance standards and providing customized supports and services specific to an individual's needs are key to a successful job outcome.

Question: *What are some general guidelines for promoting an individual's involvement in deciding what career to pursue?*

Answer: Choice may be encouraged in a number of ways. Start by always treating the person as the primary decision maker in the customized employment process. Acknowledge that CRP staff are responsible for facilitating community inclusion for individuals with disabilities. Never focus on the individual's disability; instead, affirm personal assets.

A supportive and meaningful relationship is crucial to success. Take time to develop a helping and trusting relationship with the individual who is interested in customized employment. Learn how to be a facilitator, rather than a provider of services. Assist the person in learning more about his or her personal interests as they relate to the world of work. Be flexible and attend to each individual's unique abilities and support needs. Understand the power of supports and learn some basic facilitation skills and other strategies that can help promote choice. Document the individual's abilities, preferences, and choices so that they can be used to drive the job negotiation process.

Question: *What can I do if family members do not support the person's choice to leave the workshop?*

Answer: The family who appears over protective may need time and reassurance before seeing the benefits of community employment. They may need guidance and strategies on how to facilitate customized employment outcomes. In these cases, finding out the parents' questions and providing answers to those questions will be critical. Pairing families, who have been successful in assisting their sons and daughters in identifying career preferences with families who need guidance or who are unsure, is one successful strategy. What the service provider perceives as resistance may simply mean that parents need to learn more about the benefits of customized employment.

Next, become familiar with person-centered planning strategies that can assist in identifying the individual's dreams and goals for the future. Everyone, with or without a disability, has goals and values that are central to creating a satisfying life experience. Parents also have dreams and goals for their sons and daughters. The individual who is considering working in a community job and his or her parents, if desired by the individual, need to be actively involved in the decision making process. Planning and working with the person and those who love and know him or her best will result in shared goals and action plans that result in positive vocational outcomes.

Question: *How can someone who does not verbally communicate express choice or make decisions about going to work?*

Answer: Everyone can express choices; however, the way a person with a disability demonstrates this ability may be very different. Consider for example an individual who chooses not to participate in a workshop activity or yells, screams and attempts to run out of the building when instructed to complete a task. Consider another person who does not regularly attend the workshop. Some providers may say that the first person has inappropriate behaviors and is not ready to work. Others may feel that the second person must regularly attend the workshop program in order to demonstrate that he or she wants to work in the community. However, if staff take the time to learn more about the unique styles of expressing choice for both of these individuals, they may discover that the behaviors reflect the person's choices and support needs. Providers must take the time to listen to what people have to say, especially when their communication skills are limited.

For the person who is not able to communicate or does not know what type of career or job is desired, finding out what is of interest to the person is even more critical. This is accomplished by spending time with the person. Observe what he or she does when given the freedom to choose an activity. Interview family members and friends about the person's interests and skills. Provide opportunities for the individual to observe or work briefly in a competitive job site that reflects the person's interests.

For instance, one young woman who was unable to express her work preferences really enjoyed spending time in the park watching other people with their pets. This information was gathered during interviews with her family and friends. Part of trying to identify a job of choice for her included setting up brief, two-hour experiences at a veterinarian's office and a pet store. It is

important to emphasize that these experiences are brief and are not intended to “judge” whether the person is “ready” or able to work in a community job. The experience is designed to provide opportunities so that the individual can express work preferences and choices. Once these are identified, then customized supports to assist the person in being successful in the workplace can be identified and provided.

Question: *What if the person is not qualified for the career that he or she chooses?*

Answer: This is a common question that is asked when providers begin to ask individuals with disabilities about their dreams and goals for work. Think back to when you were asked, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” Typical answers include becoming a doctor, airplane pilot, lawyer, nurse, and so forth. In many instances, your goals and dreams were modified or changed as you gained experiences and have opportunities to experience different career paths. Perhaps, becoming a doctor meant that you wanted to have the prestige and money associated with the profession. But when you discovered the qualifications that were needed, you selected another career that still provided the same rewards as becoming a doctor.

These experiences should not be any different for the individual with a disability. Providers and the support people in the lives of individuals with disabilities need to carefully consider the aspects of the career that are perceived as beyond the individual’s capabilities. What is the person trying to communicate when he or she says that being an airplane pilot is the job of choice? What interests and abilities does the person have that can result in a customized job that is reflective of the person’s vocational goals? Is the person really trying to say that he wants to work at an airport? Or, is the person trying to say that he likes airplanes but not necessarily flying them? This is when opportunities to observe and be exposed to the career of choice are important. Then, armed with information, the provider can begin to represent the person’s vocational goals and negotiate with employers to identify work in the community that can satisfy these goals.

Question: *These are all great ideas, but our program is not funded to provide the services that are described in this fact sheet. Can you give suggestions on how to fund the staff time needed to get to know the person’s interests and abilities?*

Answer: Talk with the primary funding agencies about providing support to assist an individual to explore personal employment preferences and options. Individuals who choose jobs that match their interests

have a better success rate than those who take any job that is available. Funding agencies that provide support for exploring personal options and interests will save money in the long run through better employment outcome rates. Educate your funding agency on the advantages to a more involved exploratory process.

Another strategy is to involve family members, mentors, friends, and others to identify the person’s interests and vocational goals. The employment support person does not need to be present during each experience in the community. Assist the person with a disability in identifying business sites and other places that may be of interest. Work with the support team to facilitate these visits and get feedback on what is learned when the person has an opportunity to participate in new experiences. This information can be used when the individual begins to decide what he or she would like to do for a career or job in the community.

Finally, there are multiple funding streams that are potentially available to individuals with disabilities. Funding should be flexible and should be mobile enough to follow an individual. If a person is eligible for the Medicaid Home and Community Based Services Waiver, for example, funding could be redirected into support for community exploration. You might need to work within your program to redirect funding to support these activities or you might need to explore other available options. The point is that even though a CRP has not been funded traditionally to use a person-centered approach, it is important that options be explored. Redirecting funds must be part of an organization development movement towards expanding use of integrated employment outcomes.

Summary

Choice and decision-making are important components of self-determined behavior. Without learning or getting support to facilitate these skills, some individuals will never be empowered. Unfortunately, in some instances people with disabilities have had too few opportunities to acquire such skills, have had limited access to experiences to apply them, and/or have been bound to the expectations and perceptions of others about the inabilities of individuals with disabilities. However, the good news is that when given the chance to learn these skills and practice in the course of everyday life, the skills to make informed choices can be acquired.

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Reference

- [1] P. Wehman, K.J. Inge, W.G. Revell, D. Erickson, J. Butterworth and D. Gilmore, *Community rehabilitation programs: Current status and perceptions of agencies holding special wage certificates*, Richmond, VA: Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007.