Utilizing Co-Workers as "Natural Supports": Evidence on Cost Efficiency, Job Retention, and Other Employment Outcomes


Article Summary

The author sought to determine if the use of natural supports, or the involvement of co-workers rather than job coaches for training purposes, increased the cost efficiency of supported employment programs as well as the job retention, number of hours worked, and gross wages earned for individuals with disabilities. The study also looked at the individuals age, gender, ethnicity, IQ, and number of disabilities to determine the effect that these factors might have on coworker involvement.

This study did not find a significant relationship between the use of co-workers to train individuals with disabilities and increased cost efficiency to the employee, the taxpayer, or society in general. The author suggested that this finding, which is contrary to that of other studies, could be a function of the way that he formulated cost efficiency.

During one of the periods reviewed, job coaches were present more often when co-workers were used for training. The author stated that this might be due to the job coaches spending more time supporting the coworker than would have been needed to provide direct support to the individual. This study also did not find that involvement by co-workers was significantly affected by the individuals characteristics such as IQ, level of mental retardation, gender, ethnicity, or the presence of a single versus multiple disabilities.

A significant finding was that individuals retained their jobs an average of approximately a year (12.36 months) longer when there was involvement by their co-workers than with training done by only the job coach. However, the use of natural supports did not affect job retention, the number of hours worked, or gross wages earned. Job retention was defined as staying on the job for four years. It should be noted that the mean length of employment for employees with natural supports was 3.7 years as compared to two years for those trained by job coaches.

A significant increase in time on the job has the potential to provide significant cost savings when coworkers are used to train employees with disabilities through supported employment. However, for this to be truly more efficient, the author indicated that the use of natural supports for training must result in a net increase in employee independence while maintaining the necessary level of support to enhance job retention.

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