Supported Employment in the Public Sector for People with Significant Disabilities


Article Summary

Robertson, Lewis, and Hiila point out that the growth of supported employment has shown steady growth throughout the world since its inception in the 1980s. They state that, by 2000, 61% of those Australians with disabilities who received employment services were doing so through supported employment. More specifically, however, they look at the benefits of placement into public sector versus private sector jobs.

The study examines the record of EDGE Employment Solutions, one of Australias oldest and largest employment services for individuals with disabilities. Researchers studied various data from EDGE covering the period from January 1984 through May 2002. This included 2,653 competitive job positions for 1,063 individuals with disabilities. Their database includes the following information about employee placements: demographics, primary disability, work history, means of securing placements, current job, wages, work hours, and length of time remaining on any given job. This information is linked to an employer database which differentiates between public and private sector employers.

EDGE has utilized from its start as many public sector positions in which to facilitate vocational training and placement of Western Australians with disabilities, although many similar agencies throughout the world tend to focus their efforts on placements into privately-owned businesses. Just over 20% of current EDGE placements have been into public sector positions. This is comparable to the slightly less than 20% of non-disabled Western Australians who work for federal, state, or local government. In addition, EDGE has shown a savings of AUS $13.2m to the Australian taxpayer when comparing the cost of its services (AUS$18.9 m) to that of unpaid pensions and subsidies (AUS$32.1m).

The authors suggest that agencies similar to EDGE rely more heavily on private sector placements for reasons that are perceived to be valid, but may not in fact present actual obstacles to successful employment. These include trends toward downsizing of government services, entry criteria which may create insurmountable barriers and a lengthy timeframe to secure public versus private sector jobs. The authors address these concerns but provide data to show that increased work hours, wages including benefits, and job tenure make such placements very worthwhile.

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