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### Abstract

When provided with appropriate supports, people who have high support needs are participating successfully in the workforce. In order not to limit growth in supported employment, this article suggests changes in the way support is provided. It recommends greater employer participation and ways of mobilising resources present within a company while reducing dependence on external professionals. **Keywords: Employment**

# Expanding the Role of Employers in Supported Employment

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*Since the Workforce 2000 report documenting labour trends and issues was released by the Hudson Institute in 1987, business and industry have been re-evaluating how support is provided to employees. Employee assistance programs renewed investment in training and other accommodations for an increasingly diverse workforce present an unparalleled opportunity to bring supported employment technology, values, and systems to contemporary business. This paper is an initial attempt at reconceptualising supported employment and the role of employers in providing support. Changing strategies and future research questions that may need to be addressed are discussed.*

DESCRIPTORS: employment, natural environment, service delivery, supported employment

When provided appropriate supports, people with disabilities are participating successfully in the mainstream of the nation's workforce in growing numbers. Supported employment has expanded in a remarkably short time to include more than 10% of persons with developmental disabilities who previously were enrolled in day services (Wehman, Kregel, & Shafer, 1989). Nonetheless, if service systems are to meet the ever-increasing demands for supported employment, we must reform our methods and pursue new approaches for expanding employment opportunities for people with severe disabilities. Two

frequently cited issues arise from this need. First, limited resources will restrict growth in supported employment unless available resources can be used more effectively (Mank, Buckley, & Rhodes, 1990). Furthermore, few opportunities for community jobs exist for people with the most severe disabilities (Wehman, Kregel, Shafer, & West, 1989).

There is an additional reason to re-examine current job support strategies: the possible contributions of employers have been understated and under-utilised. As a result, service providers and other professionals have tended to assume responsibility for basic functions of business: the hiring, training, and supervision of their employees. O'Brien (1990) noted that overdependence on social service professionals overextends service organizations' capabilities and authority, and interferes with community participation.

O'Brien's observation appears to be an accurate reflection of the rapidly

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developing state of supported employment services. The traditional system of day services is being replaced by another that may be equally dependent on professionals who routinely provide such supports as training, supervision, arranging work hours, and behavior interventions.

A reversal of this tendency to support "intrusively" employees with disabilities may be in the best interests of business and supported employment alike. This paper is an initial attempt at reconceptualising supported employment and the role of employers. The implications are discussed in terms of changes in the manner in which support is conceived and delivered and the value of these changes to business interests in relation to competitiveness, quality, and labour shortages.

### **Changing Strategies and Opportunities in Supported Employment**

When considering how supported employment and business can be of mutual benefit, it is important to note developments in supported employment practices and in the manner in which support organizations, employees with disabilities, and companies interact. There are four such developments.

#### **1. Employment Strategies Continue to Evolve**

Supported employment began with a focus on outcomes rather than on the service process. Early implementation efforts used specific models (e.g., Bellamy, Rhodes, Mank, & Albin, 1988; Bourbeau, 1985; Wehman, 1981) to create examples of ways to produce supported employment outcomes for people with severe

disabilities. These service models had some utility as templates for service providers in early program development. However, they have become less useful as companies and service providers support individuals in ways that defy discrete labels (e.g., should two persons doing janitorial work and working for a single employer but in different locations be referred to as two individuals with supported jobs, an enclave, or a "stationary" crew?). Furthermore, just as supported employment is defined by outcomes, variations in the manner in which support resources are used should be evaluated relative to the real outcomes produced. Constant adjustments in service processes should generate new ideas for providing support. The notion of fostering natural workplace supports (Nisbet & Hagner, 1988) is an example of evolving support strategies.

#### **2. Early Supported Employment Efforts Only Minimally Involved the Employer**

One assumption of early implementation efforts was that employers would require significant "convincing" in order to employ individuals with severe disabilities (Kiernan & Stark, 1986). The traditional sales tactic has been to project positive features to attract the "buyer." Thus, marketing strategies tended to sell supported employment in a way that assured employers that job analysis, training, and ongoing support would be provided by an external agent, and that work performance was virtually guaranteed. As a result, employers have been asked to play a lesser role than when hiring, training, and supervising employees who do not have disabilities. Failing to involve

employers in their conventional roles may restrict the integration and participation of employees with disabilities.

### **3. Company Resources Present Opportunities for Support**

Fundamental changes in business management have been occurring over the last 10 years, in part as a response to perceived problems with American competitiveness in the global economy. W. Edwards Deming has been at the vanguard of this movement. Deming has prescribed guidelines for management that include: reducing the knowledge gap between management and "the humblest worker," building a constancy of purpose that encompasses employee interests, increasing effectiveness of supervision, and conducting vigorous education and training for all employees (Deming, 1982, 1988). Many American businesses are heeding Deming's call for renewed investment in their employees. The business literature has addressed the need for (a) positive reinforcement of employees (Peters, 1988; Podsakoff, Todor, & Skov, 1982); (b) feedback to employees about their performance (Balcazar, Hopkins, & Suarez, 1985); (c) management support for employee training (McLagan, 1988; Smith, 1989); (d) investment in quality of work life (Alexander, 1988; Kondo, 1989); and (e) the integration of new knowledge in day-to-day business operations (Waldman & Spangler, 1989; Zeleny, 1989).

We must recognize that companies are using their own resources to support employees - resources that have been largely untapped for the purpose of providing support to employees with disabilities. Social

Researchers have suggested that companies can increase the socialisation rate of new employees through training programs, orientation, and buddy systems (Reichers, 1987). Such "in-company" supports must be considered when discussing and designing supported employment with a business (e.g., Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Shafer, 1988).

### **4. Employers benefit from the Skills Brought by Supported Employment Developers**

In part, the movement to improve the workforce is a response to the growing national labour crisis. Demographic trends documented in the *Workforce 2000* report indicate slower growth in the workforce, leading to labour shortages, and larger percentages of new workers who require additional training and support (Fosler, 1989; Johnston & Packer, 1987). In a recent follow-up to the *Workforce 2000* report, a study of 645 companies documented employers' problems in responding to rapid workforce shifts. Such issues as high turnover and a lack of training capacity were cited (Fuchsberg, 1990).

The instructional technology that enabled people with severe disabilities to acquire vocational skills in sheltered settings (e.g., Bellamy, Horner, & Inman, 1979; Rusch & Mithaug, 1980)

The instructional technology that enabled people with severe disabilities to acquire vocational skills in sheltered settings (e.g., Bellamy, Hon 1979; Rusch & Mithaug, 1980) has now been refined and applied in business settings (Buckley, Mank & Sandow, 1990; Mcloughlin, Garner, & Callahan, 1987) There is growing evidence that employers value the

contributions that environmental analysis, job restructuring, and self-management training bring to their companies (e.g., *Employment News*, 1989; Washington Supported Employment Initiative, 1990). For example, recent reports suggest that businesses seek greater precision in environmental and job analyses (DeNisi, Cornelius, & Blencoe, 1987; Fox, 1988). They may find what is needed in the procedures developed for supporting persons with severe disabilities.

### **Developing a New Framework for Support**

The changes described above provide an environment for significant advancements in developing supported employment by mobilising the resources present within a company while reducing dependence on external professionals. When solutions to employee support needs are viewed as a collective responsibility that benefits employer and employee, the roles, predetermined service models of the professional service provider no longer apply. Supported employment professionals should consider redefining their services to focus on defining new relationships with employers. These relationships should center upon increasing an employer's capacity to hire and support employees with disabilities. Several examples follow.

#### **1. Extend Support Techniques to Employer Personnel**

Techniques commonly used by job coaches and other rehabilitation professionals to support people with severe disabilities are valuable to supervisors. Precise instruction, supervision, job analysis, and self-management strategies can be

imparted to supervisors and rather than used solely by job coaches to support the employee with disabilities. Co-worker training that has eliminated the need for job coaching is now routinely provided to employers in some companies (Mank, Rhodes & Sandow, 1991)

#### **2. Assist Company Training Departments**

Many larger companies have designated trainers or training departments. Most still use traditional methods for recruiting and training despite the workforce problems discussed earlier (Fuchsberg, 1990). The individually orientated training practices of supported employment organisations can be important resources for companies, particularly when these companies recognize that the value of instructional technology used for supported employees has plant-wide application. In one study of the effects of co-worker training, the company employees who received training in support strategies demonstrated an improvement in training skills, and reported a wider application of these skills with employees who were not considered disabled (Mank et al., 1991)

#### **3. Utilise Employee Assistance Programs**

Employee assistance programs (EAPs) continue to grow rapidly as companies respond to the shortage of motivated, dependable labour. EAPs typically provide alcohol and drug treatment, and other benefits. In a recent survey of 40 Oregon companies, more than half reported using a variety of employee assistance programs to accommodate the job-related needs of individual

employees (Rhodes, Albin, Sandow, & Petherbridge, in preparation). EAP offerings could be expanded to include many of the job supports provided by rehabilitation agencies, such as travel training, responding to home crises that affect work, or troubleshooting attendance or tardiness problems. It may be possible to vendorise EAP programs by using public support funds to pay the additional costs of such services. An alternative might be for service providers to work under contract with EAP organizations.

#### **4. Develop the Capacity of Trade Associations**

Trade organizations exist to provide a range of services to their members, including, for example, seminars and in-service training. Given the need for training in companies (Fuchsberg, 1990), trade associations will likely expand their training focus. These associations provide forums in which companies could learn about supported employment, and share knowledge and expertise with each other.

#### **5. Shape the Service System To Be Responsive to Employers**

There are many examples of how we expect companies to make accommodations to the service system when hiring a supported employee. Accommodation of the service system often seems to exceed that required for the employee with disabilities. Examples are: (a) support funding is often a predetermined amount that disregards individual need; (b) in some businesses work hours may be adjusted for job coach convenience; and (c) companies with jobs available and an interest in employing people with disabilities have been known to wait months for

supported employee referrals. For employers to provide more support to employees with severe disabilities, state and local service systems must act in ways that make it easier, rather than more difficult, to do so.

#### **Discussion**

Inviting employer participation and responding to business needs for a reliable labour source are important ways to facilitate the expansion of supported employment. Natural support not only holds promise for expanding employment opportunities, but it also ties future stability to the community rather than to the social service system. Evolving strategies to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities are of value to businesses attempting to establish support for others in the workforce who require assistance. The use of support strategies designed for people with severe disabilities or other non-traditional workers would enable employers to support current employees while service providers make greater use of naturally occurring supports for individuals with disabilities.

It would be unwise to prescribe the specific steps that would lead supported employment professionals toward the five suggestions for designing a new framework for support. Uncertainty is warranted: It is too soon to suggest that business-centered training is best vested in community colleges rather than service providers, or that all service providers should approach trade organizations. It is important that supported employment professionals question whether and how they can assist employers in developing employer capacity to hire people with severe disabilities.

Answers to questions such as how best to train employees, what types of materials will support this training, when training should be done, and how we encourage employers' receptivity to these strategies will unfold through examples and future research. Furthermore, useful solutions are probably best determined with company leadership and involvement.

We do know that supported employment developers are currently working with employers in innovative ways, negotiating variations in support roles for the benefit of business and employees. The training of co-workers and supervisors in some companies is providing employers with the information and confidence that is required for supporting employees with disabilities. From the fast food industry to electronics, there are examples of managers engaged in supported employment who are assisting in developing jobs in other companies. As a result of successful experiences in one location, larger companies are developing supported employment in their divisions in other states. These contributions are being made in areas that historically have been the exclusive domain of not-for-profit organizations and state agencies. This requires that organizations providing supported employment service identify a new range of skills and roles for their organisation.

Emerging examples and suggested new possibilities raise important but unanswered questions. With the changes in workforce demographics and the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act, research and demonstrations are needed that address such questions as:

How can support be provided effectively to employers instead of only to employees with disabilities?

What roles are co-workers already providing to employees with disabilities?

What range of job accommodations can be used for employees with differing disabilities?

How do companies benefit from increasing their capacity to hire, train, and supervise employees with severe disabilities?

These questions can begin to help frame a new research agenda for the evolving concept of supported employment.

Several dynamics appear to influence business interest in expanding its capacity to support people with disabilities. The first is the preponderance of evidence that workers with disabilities do not need to rely solely on job coaches (Mank et al., 1991; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Rusch, 1990). It is apparent that co-workers will support workers with disabilities; the only issue is the extents to which that support fills the total support needs.

The second dynamic is the changing demographics of the work force. Recently, executives have defined the future labour shortage as dramatically changing their strategies for maintaining an adequate workforce. The editor of *Financial World* reported that new workers have questionable basic skills and that only half of the 500 biggest corporations have training programs (Smith, 1989). William Brock, former United States

Secretary of Labour, described the unique window of opportunity that exists for bringing groups with longstanding employment problems into the mainstream of the economy. He stated, "to take full advantage of this opportunity, and to prevail in the competitive cauldron of a global economy, [requires] more flexibility and adaptability" (Brock, 1987, p. 39).

It is suggested that this adaptability begins with placing an emphasis on "systems that allow the workforce to realise its intellectual potential" (Ong, 1989, p. 471). This statement reflects the third dynamic: business and supported employment personnel methods are rapidly converging. It is increasingly common for business authors to write about established techniques such as reinforcement (Peters, 1988) and for supported employment professionals to write about established management techniques such as quality improvement (e.g., Albin, in press; Sandow, Rhodes, Mank, Ramsing & Lynch, 1990).

The last dynamic has to do with resources. The public trust is not inexhaustible, and will support only a finite number of people with disabilities. The future of supported employment for people with severe disabilities would seem to rely heavily on employers' abilities to develop the skills, knowledge, and will to provide support, and the service system's ability to support businesses in doing that.

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