

## Guest Editorial

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# Personal Assistance Services in the Workplace

This issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (JVR) will take a comprehensive look at personal assistance services (PAS) as a workplace support. PAS has been widely utilized throughout the 1980s as a tool to assist individuals to integrate into the community. However, it was not viewed as an employment tool until the early 1990s. It gained prominence as a workplace support under the leadership of Ms Judith Heumann, Assistant Secretary, United States Department of Education. Ms Heumann used the service herself and brought many talented individuals with significant disabilities into federal government service by providing workplace PAS as a reasonable accommodation.

Contributors to this issue will examine the many issues impacting access to workplace PAS. These issues range from rehabilitation professionals not fully understanding how workplace PAS can be used to increase the productivity of employees with disabilities to the fact that many employees themselves do not know how to find the right person to assist them on the job. Other issues include federal or state regulations that serve as barriers and disincentives to using PAS in the workplace.

As you read the articles in this journal, I think you will agree, all of the writers did a great job detailing the complex issues and aspects surrounding the utilization of PAS as a workplace support. Many of the authors have been associated with the issue of PAS for many years. They bring with them a wide range of perspectives and are all very knowledgeable in their fields.

Our first author is Mr. Tony Young, a nationally known advocate and pioneer of PAS as a workplace support. He has traced the evolution of this service from a community-based support to its use to find and maintain employment. Mr. Young is well qualified to discuss this topic because he uses a personal assistant on his job and also sits on many national boards that for-

mulate policies on the use of PAS. His article regarding the evolution of PAS is a springboard for the discussion of many issues surrounding workplace PAS that will be addressed by other authors in this JVR issue.

John Barrett, a workplace personal assistant at the VCU RRTC on Workplace Supports, describes the skills, competencies, and attributes of being a good workplace personal assistant. Mr. Barrett has thirteen years experience as a workplace personal assistant supporting an individual with a significant disability. Although he does not use a personal assistant himself, Mr. Barrett is a person with a significant disability, and he knows the qualities necessary to provide the right level of support, both in the home and at the workplace.

Mr. Michael Barcus, Training Associate at the VCU RRTC on Workplace Supports, and Ms. Pam Targett, Director of Employment Services at the VCU RRTC, discuss workplace PAS as a reasonable accommodation. Both authors are experienced in supervising individuals with significant disabilities, and they understand the value of employees using workplace PAS to increase an employee's productivity. They examine the challenges employers face in providing PAS as a reasonable accommodation to employees with significant disabilities and conclude their article by saying that the advantages of providing workplace PAS far surpass the challenges.

Ms. Wendy Strobel and Ms. Jennifer Todd-McDonough, both former employment specialists, discuss the importance of using workplace PAS and Assistive Technology on the job. In their article, they describe unique ways to use both of those valuable supports in assisting individuals with significant disabilities find and maintain meaningful careers. They also describe various web sites where rehabilitation professionals can get information on how to assist individuals with dis-

abilities to obtain assistive devices and workplace PAS which will enable them to perform their jobs.

Dr. Alette Cobel-Temple, a former Research Associate at the World Institute on Disability, highlights in her article findings of focus groups comprised of users of workplace PAS. Ms. Cobel-Temple and her colleagues point out the barriers and difficulties that focus group participants faced in trying to recruit and keep reliable personal assistants to assist them in the workplace. She is a user of workplace PAS herself and therefore has first-hand experience with many of the issues described in her article.

Ms Susan Webb, a former Center for Independent Living Executive Director, highlights public policy issues around workplace PAS. She discusses some of the federal regulations that tend to be barriers to the employment of persons with significant disabilities in the utilization of PAS as a workplace support. Among those federal regulations are those that tie health insurance companies to maintaining eligibility for receiving cash benefits. This policy causes many employees to keep their earned income low in order to maintain health coverage, which is a serious disincentive to pursue meaningful careers.

Dr. Paul Wehman, Director of the VCU RRTC on Workplace Supports, describes methods for identifying and promoting quality integration outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities. He describes integration indicators, procedures for assessing integration opportunities in the workplace, and strategies for improving integration and quality of life outcomes.

As the Guest Editor for this issue, it was my pleasure to solicit articles from such a group of knowledgeable and talented writers. I also had the opportunity to contribute articles on finding the right personal assistant and using a personal assistant in the workplace. These articles discuss the dynamics of using a personal assistant in a very competitive work environment and stress the importance of recruiting the

right person to work in such an environment. Practical self-assessment methods are also described that employees with disabilities need to utilize before attempting to recruit a workplace personal assistant.

I would like to acknowledge the dedicated and hard work of my co-editor, Grant Revell, in helping put this issue of the JVR together. He has used his excellent editorial skills to maximize the content of those who contributed to this issue. His invaluable assistance has enhanced the value of the information about workplace PAS for all those who took the time to read this issue.

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As a Training Associate at the VCU RRTC on Workplace Supports and a user of a workplace personal assistant on my job, as well as in my private life, I appreciate the value of this support. I believe the information on personal assistance service in the workplace that is contained in this special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* will help you, the rehabilitation professional, better understand PAS as a employment support. PAS is critically important tool for you to use in your efforts to support people with the most significant disabilities in achieving job success and meaningful careers.

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