

## Supported employment: Toward reducing the impact of disability

It has been almost two decades since the initial published reports began to appear on supported employment as a means to help people with significant disabilities become competitively employed. During these past 20 years, we have learned a great deal about what works in supported employment and what does not work [5]. We have also learned that there are many challenging implementation issues as well as persistent philosophical differences that have created major barriers to full implementation. We have seen greater amounts of deinstitutionalization [3], the closing of state institutions [7], the downsizing of sheltered workshops, the selective reallocation of funds targeted from segregated programs to integrated programs and a more significant voice given to people with disabilities via the statutes, as well as advocacy movement [8]. We have seen changes in the way that persons with mental retardation are classified by the American Association on Mental Retardation [4] with a movement away from intelligent quotient labels which are derived from tests and a movement towards a description of supports, both level and intensity, that is required for description of persons with cognitive disabilities. In fact, the "hot" term for the 1980's was supports and this terminology has only been strengthened through the new "hot term" of self-determination. The implicit power of supported employment, supported education or supported living when intertwined with the philosophical depth of self-determination and free choice is a powerful means of marrying the programmatic strategy (supports) with the philosophical foundation (self-determination).

What have we learned over the past 20 years? Well, the most significant contribution that I feel has been generated through the evolution of supported employment and other programs which define themselves in a context of supports is the demystification of disability or put another way the reduction of the impact of disability. When one thinks of disability, one immediately thinks of terms such as handicapped, impairment, unable to do, less qualified, etc. These are the thoughts

and perceptions of too many people in society. The gift of supported employment has been to reduce the impact of disability, even if it is only during that time frame that the individual goes to work for eight hours. Once that individual departs the workplace, they may well be forced into a situation where they have to "put back on" their physical disability or mental retardation label.

For example, consider the case of Roseanne, a lady with a significant physical disability and also cognitive disability. Roseanne has very limited speech and requires some personal assistant services throughout the day. When Roseanne works at the Wal Mart Department Store placing security scanners on the CD's in the electronics department, earning \$7.20 an hour, receiving health benefits, and participating in the profit sharing plan, Roseanne is reducing or omitting her disability label. She, in fact, is not disabled at all during this work frame and through the eyes of coworkers and management is nondisabled because they are depending on her to complete her employment. Once the end of her shift arrives, however, she is totally dependent on the local transit systems that serves people with physical disabilities and is totally at their mercy. In fact, Roseanne, once she wheels out of the Wal Mart Department Store must "put her label on" again and be dependent. The more that the concepts of supports can permeate not only the human service system, but communities and society as a whole, the more infused into the mainstream of daily life will individuals with disabilities become.

Many people who are reading this have been in the disability field for many years. This respective field may be in special education, rehabilitation, advocacy services, administration, psychology, or occupational therapy. The specific field really doesn't matter. What does matter is that all of us are vulnerable to a disability or an injury at any point in time. Many of us experience permanent injury or chronic illness or disability or live with loved ones who do. Disability, particu-

larly significant disability, is the great equalizer across gender, race, and socioeconomic status. The quickest road to humility is to experience significant disability. The quickest road out of significant disability is to experience supports from family, friends, and competent professionals who know how to interact with people in a dignified and nonpatriotizing way.

When we review the progress that has been made in supported employment over the last two decades, we must always return to our core values. It is these core values which have defined not only supported employment, but have created the substantial spillover effect of supports equaling reduction of disability. No one is independent. We are all inter-independent [2]. The concept of true independence does not truly exist. We may all feel that we are completely independent at one time or another in our life, but invariably we will need others to help combat the physical, emotional, and intellectual disabilities that crowd into our life. Understanding that we are all interdependent helps pave the way for understanding the role and impact of supports in designing systems that can help elevate people to a higher level.

The core values that have permeated supported employment are inclusion, consumer choice and involvement, a career path, parity in wage and hour benefit, parity in work style options and choices and the opportunity to be employed in the quickest most efficient manner possible as opposed to being subjected to extensive day program, nursing home or other segregated program activity. Much of this activity is well meant, but neither the data nor the philosophical perspectives of the people who are effected the most are consistent with this type of service delivery arrangement. The time is long over due to cease segregated program services and to expand competitive employment opportunities.

The U.S. economy continues to move along in such a way as to be almost desperate for more workers. Only recently the Chief of the United States Federal Reserve, Allen Greenspan [1] was reported as being concerned that the number of available workers in the U.S. market was dwindling to a dangerously low level. Once the number of available workers dropped to an intolerable level, wages must increase significantly to coax workers to come to work at different businesses. This creates substantial inflationary pressures. In a tragic irony we have hundreds of thousands of individuals with disabilities that could work. The pending Work Incentives Act (S 331) will hopefully open up many more doors into business and industry for people with disabilities

who have not worked before. It will provide major new provisions to work such as the following:

- Those who become ineligible for Social Security disability benefits on returning to work could continue their Medicare coverage.
- Those with disabilities could buy Medicaid coverage even if they took jobs and earned income that would otherwise disqualify them.
- State could allow workers with disabilities to buy Medicaid coverage, even if they lost their eligibility for cash benefits because their medical conditions improved.
- It creates a pilot program under which states could provide Medicaid to workers not considered disabled, but who have physical or mental impairments that are “reasonably expected” to become severe if they lack health care. This pilot is controversial because it involves conditions such as multiple sclerosis or HIV that could lead to disabilities in the future.
- It increase training and job-search program for those with disabilities and provide assurances that cash assistance would resume if persons become unemployed.

Even with these positive forces and the ADA, I suspect that much more will need to be done. Systems change at a local and state level, alliances with business, person-centered planning and self-determination when combined with a “supports” philosophy and strong economy will ultimately propel persons with disabilities into the labor force. As we enter the new millennium we must set our sights much higher building on the volumes of new knowledge established over the past two decades.

### **Work support tips column**

It is a pleasure to introduce yet another new feature of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* which is contributed by Phillip Rumrill, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Rehabilitation Counseling at Kent State University, USA. This workplace supports column is aimed at the direct service provider, rehabilitation counselor, and others who work on a day to day basis to create better job outcomes for people with special needs. In an ongoing effort to enhance the productivity and performance of workers with disabilities, we have decided that this special column will be a helpful feature of “hands-on” practical tips that can be immediately applied at the

job site. We ask readers of the Journal to please write in and give us feedback related to the types of information that would be useful. Assistive technology devices, different applications of the Internet, electronic computer, and other engineering applications, as well as utilization of job coach and behavioral technologies, are all appropriate types of workplace tips that could be utilized in this column. Dr. Rumrill will provide leadership in generating the initial information for these regular columns; however, it would be our hope that readers would write to e-mail (pwehman@atlas.vcu.edu) with their own sample articles which can be in the three to four page area and upon editorial review by myself and Dr. Rumrill can be published under the name of the contributor. This is part of our ongoing process to appeal not only to the academician and research scientist, but equally to the direct service provider and individual who needs ready-to-go program applications at the work site.

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