

FROM THE EDITOR

Dr. Adelle Renzaglia has recruited an excellent group of contributors for this special issue on career development. A broad array of different vocational training topics are included in this issue. For those service providers, special education teachers, and rehabilitation counselors who are particularly interested in helping clients improve their vocational skills and employment outcomes, this will be an excellent issue. There are many vocational training issues, and Dr. Renzaglia has done a superb job of pulling together articles that address the multiplicity of these different topics. I have known Dr. Renzaglia for 20 years and can say honestly that she is as good a vocational trainer for people with very severe intellectual disabilities as I have ever known. She is well suited to lead this issue.

In the context of vocational training and work outcome, I would like to use this space to direct several remarks to the subject of natural supports. As many people in the field are aware, this is a topic of growing interest and has begun to find its way into professional presentations, the professional literature (e.g., Nisbet, 1992), and even the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992. Leading professionals such as Nisbet (1992) and Callahan (1992) are to be applauded, indeed, for helping the field to focus on the issue of more natural approaches to job retention. This dialogue has been important to the evolution of supported employment. Natural supports in the workplace have been increasingly discussed by the thousands of professionals, consumers, and their families who are involved or participating in supported employment programs.

As one of the professionals who was fortunate enough to be a part of the beginnings of supported employment almost 13 years ago, I have given a great deal of thought to natural supports. More importantly, however, I have asked hundreds of people who have attended presentations that I have made or participated in training sessions, or from whom I have received telephone calls about their views of natural supports. What I find after 2 years of careful deliberation about this topic is that more questions emerge than answers. I have a sense that there is no replicable technology on natural supports that can be shared with local ser-

vice providers. Hence, it is only fair to ask some pointed questions about a concept that may affect tens of thousands of people who are already in support employment programs—but with no data to support the validity of using natural supports exclusively.

My first question is, What are natural supports? More specifically, what are natural supports in the workplace? How is this concept defined? How do we measure the existence of natural supports? How do we assess whether natural supports are available and what their impact is? Parent, Kregel, and Wehman (1992) have developed the Vocational Integration Index, which looks at important indicators for integration in the workplace; yet, in no way would I say that this index constitutes the definition of or even a vehicle for measuring natural supports. What is “natural” or “typical,” to use Nisbet’s (1992) term about coworkers who spend substantial amounts of their time training or working with people who are challenged with very severe behavioral, physical, or cognitive disabilities, when those coworkers have their own work responsibilities to the company? One also must ask who trained the coworker in the first place to provide these supports? Again, this is not to say that if a major corporation is willing to subsidize this type of activity, it should not be embraced by those of us in the helping professions. The question is how “natural” is this type of a concept?

Furthermore, in those situations involving the most challenged people with disabilities, will coworkers be able permanently to deal with the variety of challenging behaviors and psychological/emotional problems that some of the people who are now participating in supported employment exhibit? Again, the real question that needs to be answered is, what are natural supports in the workplace? If this concept cannot be defined operationally, then it, along with terms such as gentle teaching (McGee, 1992) and facilitated communication (Biklen et al., 1991), as wonderful as they may appear to some, should not be thoroughly embraced and used by the field as a whole. This is because these concepts have not been sufficiently delineated so that thoughtful clinicians and yes, even scientists, can measure, assess, and evaluate

the impact that they have on clients, as well as on the families who have entrusted their sons and daughters to human service programs.

Nisbet (1992) wraps the concept of natural supports around the most compelling and powerful philosophy of the 1990s, that is, empowerment. Who would argue with the need for people to take more control over their lives, have greater choices, and be empowered to do so? Of course, that should be a paramount goal of any program serving people with disabilities, but does simple creation of natural supports in the workplace (whatever they may be) automatically lead to this type of empowerment? I think not; I suspect this idea is more wishful thinking than something that we have any empirical data to support.

My good friend and colleague, Vicki Brooke, has suggested that the true question is, What work arrangement and what level of support do people with disabilities want? (V. Brooke, personal communication, February 12, 1993). Perhaps the real issue is one of self-determination, that is, control over one's life (Mithaug, 1991; e.g., Ward, 1993; Wehman, 1993). I think this is the cutting-edge issue that proponents of natural supports are missing.

Many have asked another question related to natural supports: Are natural supports only for people with mild or moderate disabilities? Many speculate that the concept of natural supports is nothing more than a return to time-limited placement of people with disabilities, but with no support network put in place. Where are the safeguards for people with disabilities when there is no ongoing thread of support available? Is this a paternalistic concern? These are not unreasonable issues to consider, especially when it is well known that even many professionals lack the competencies to work successfully with people who have the most severe behavioral, learning, and/or physical challenges. If professionals are having difficulty in placing, training, and helping to maintain these individuals, it is not unreasonable to ask how first-line supervisors who are extremely busy, coworkers who should have their own work responsibilities, and others in the workplace will be able to deal with behaviors such as uncontrollable seizures or unexpected outbursts of a severe magnitude, as

well as the numerous difficulties that can be presented by people who have multiple physical challenges. Once again, this is not to suggest in any way that the individuals with the most severe disabilities cannot or should not work; I have built a career on just the opposite notion. The question is: Are natural supports the vehicle for this to happen?

As I deliberate the notion of natural supports, increasingly I come back to this thought: Is it a question of natural supports alone, or a question of using job coaches to facilitate the use of a supportive work environment that should be considered? As early as 1981, we wrote in *Competitive Employment* about the importance of job retention in what we termed "solving the fading dilemma" (Wehman, 1981). Issues such as transferring verbal control from the staff trainer to the real supervisor, reduction of supervision in client accessibility to trainers, transferring client reinforcement to the real supervisor, teaching self-reinforcement, unobtrusive observation schedule, and use of coworkers and supervisors were all listed and discussed in detail (Wehman, 1981). In similar fashion, Rusch and Mithaug (1980) have enunciated the importance of this aspect of any good competitive employment program, as have Kiernan and Stark (1986).

One final compelling point needs to be made about natural supports. My valued friend, John Kregel, suggests that proponents of natural supports strongly draw on this strategy as a means to promote the employment retention of supported employment workers (J. Kregel, personal communication, February 14, 1993). A major argument against the job coach model is that the (presumed) intrusive presence of the job coach isolates the individual and prevents the development of appropriate relationships between the employee and his or her supervisor or coworkers. Therefore, the employee becomes too reliant on the employment specialist and is susceptible to failure and separation once the employment specialist fades from the job site. While it may be true that some supported employment participants have lost their jobs because their employment specialist spent too much time on the job site or failed to allow the individual to respond to the naturally

occurring supervision and interaction at the site, this line of reasoning fails to recognize or understand the real reasons why supported employment participants tend to lose their jobs.

For example, in a recent study of over 1,600 supported employment participants who had been separated from employment, Kregel, Parent, and West (1993) found that only one in five individuals (22%) lost their job due to an inability to meet the productivity or performance demands of their position. In other words, the vast majority of employees are able to do the job. However, a variety of other factors frequently combine to make long-term employment retention extremely challenging. Individuals are far more likely to lose their jobs because of external factors such as disruption in transportation, reoccurrence of medical problems, parental or familial concerns, economic layoffs, or chronic absenteeism (which may result from substance abuse or other personal problems occurring away from the job site). In short, the reasons for job separation on the part of supported employment participants are most often complex and beyond the areas effectively addressed by supervisors and coworkers. This is particularly true for individuals with cerebral palsy or traumatic brain injuries. Kregel et al. (1993) feel that, for

these individuals, the employment specialist often fulfills the role of an advocate, assisting the individual in locating and accessing necessary supports and service both on and off the work site.

I believe that job coaches, or whatever term we use to describe professionals who help people with disabilities in the workplace, will continue to be necessary to provide some degree of supported employment service for many of the reasons and issues that I have discussed above. However, our goals should be to help the client develop greater control over his or her work life and delineate those strategies that enhance the likelihood of long-term retention and job satisfaction. For those who propose exclusive reliance on natural supports, the challenge should be clear. It will be necessary to define natural supports, measure them, and assess their impact on an ongoing basis, using repeated measures over time. No less and no more can be demanded from any concept that is expected to move the field further and which enjoys the full confidence of thoughtful clinicians and scientists across the helping professions. To do less will be to do the field of supported employment and competitive employment, not to mention the very individuals that we purport to serve, a great disservice.

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