

Commentary

Workplace issues and placement: What is high quality employment?

Implicit in a discussion of workplace issues and placement is the aspect of quality; high quality employment leading to social and economic integration. We want people with disabilities to have the chance to work but not just in any job. We want people with disabilities to have the opportunity to attain employment commensurate with their interests and abilities. But what is high quality employment?

Today, most would agree that people with disabilities are employable, but the real question is whether we as a society and as a service delivery system truly believe that people with disabilities can achieve equal status in society. Do we really believe that people with disabilities have the full range of talents and abilities as others and, given training and opportunity, can work competitively throughout society in all types of jobs and occupations? Is our commitment to high quality employment or is it simply a generalized commitment to helping people with disabilities find work?

In my view, high quality employment means the ability to earn a living wage in an integrated setting at a job that the individual finds challenging and satisfying. Beginning with wages, we know that there is a strong correlation between education and earnings. The more education an individual has, the more money he or she is likely to make. During the time I served as the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), I had the privilege of overseeing a five-year Longitudinal Study of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services program. The findings, while important, were neither startling nor unexpected. According to the study, competitively employed individuals with disabilities with less than a high school diploma or GED equivalency earn an average of \$6.30 per hour. Those with more than a high school education average slightly over \$9 per hour, or over 40% greater earnings,

due to higher academic achievement. But of course, \$9 per hour is, at best, barely a living wage. Unfortunately, the Longitudinal Study showed that only 18% of all competitively employed people with disabilities had earned any kind of degree beyond a high school diploma or GED equivalency. And less than 3% held an advanced degree.

As important as they are, earnings are not the only measure of high quality employment. Another critical aspect is integration. I believe that in addition to earning a living wage, people with disabilities have the right to live integrated lives. For far too long, people with disabilities have been segregated from society, and not out of choice. During the time I served as Commissioner, I issued regulations eliminating sheltered work as an allowable employment outcome for people with disabilities under the VR program. The findings of the Longitudinal Study showed that individuals placed in segregated employment were paid very low wages (on average, \$3.03 per hour). The problem of low earnings was compounded by limited work hours. And in addition people working in sheltered employment also had limited access to health insurance and other benefits. Of course there are those who argue that integration is not a value that should be thrust on people with disabilities. They argue that people with disabilities have the right to choose for themselves the employment setting that best fits their individual needs. Nevertheless, in my view, far too many people with disabilities have been placed in segregated employment not out of choice, but because it was the only option available. While it may be true that some people elect to work in sheltered workshops, it strains credibility to argue that given a choice, people with disabilities would prefer to work in a segregated setting at a sub-minimum wage with limited work hours and virtually no prospect for upward mobility.

Choice is a central component of high quality employment. Nevertheless choice should not be used as a way of tracking people with disabilities into low-skilled, low-wage jobs. To make informed choices, people with disabilities must have the encouragement and support necessary to explore and develop their individual potential. In short, high quality employment is a job consistent with the individual's interests and abilities. Whether the job requires a high school diploma or an advanced degree, whether it is humble or lofty, is not the sole measure. At the same time, if people with disabilities are disproportionately represented in low-skilled, low-wage jobs, then we must ask ourselves whether people with disabilities are indeed finding employment consistent with their interests and abilities or whether our system is perpetuating low expectations – placing people with disabilities in the most readily available jobs rather than investing the time and resources to help the individual attain employment which he or she finds challenging and rewarding.

The staggering unemployment rate among people with disabilities can be significantly reduced by working to place more people with disabilities into jobs, but high quality jobs are the key to true economic independence. High quality jobs mean higher potential earnings, which include critical benefits such as health insurance and retirement plans. High quality jobs mean jobs that are not dead end, but have oppor-

tunities for career advancement. And most important, high quality jobs mean access to integrated work which the individual finds challenging and rewarding. It is unconscionable to train people with disabilities for entry-level, low-paying jobs with few or no benefits when additional training or education would qualify them for better jobs with better benefits and the possibility of economic independence. We serve no one well when we assist an individual in becoming underemployed.

We must continue to seek to break free from the bonds of minimal expectations which have kept people with disabilities unemployed and underemployed throughout time. Collectively, we must broaden our conception of disability and recognize that people with disabilities have the same talents and abilities as others and can work competitively in integrated settings alongside their nondisabled peers. To make this come true, we must continue to seek opportunities for high quality employment, but not just to lift people with disabilities out of poverty. We must continue to seek opportunities for high quality employment because it is just – because people with disabilities have the right and capacity to achieve true social and economic integration.

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