Strategies for Maximizing Staff Competence When Supporting Job Seekers with Disabilities in One-Stop Career Centers

INTRODUCTION

Since states began implementing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, One-Stop Career Centers have had to address the challenges of serving all customers seeking services, including job seekers with disabilities. To meet this challenge, many local One-Stops have demonstrated commitment to and progress towards creating innovative practices that positively affect access for job seekers with disabilities in the workforce system. The following brief is offered as a tool for local workforce systems to help achieve meaningful employment outcomes for job seekers with disabilities.

STAFF KNOWLEDGE AND CONCERNS RELATED TO DISABILITY AND EMPLOYMENT*

One-Stops that effectively served job seekers with disabilities spent energy and resources on staff development and training. However, even with these efforts, there continued to be concerns about One-Stop staff members' understanding of disability issues and employment. One manager at the One-Stop in Utica, New York reported that staff had greater difficulty when a disability was not easily identifiable and the individual required more assistance. Staff members were often unclear about how to proceed or how to suggest other resources that might be appropriate.

On a more specific level, One-Stops also struggled with assistive technology available for people with disabilities.

This brief is part of a series of products offering practical solutions for Local Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stop Career Centers as they strive to serve all customers, including those with disabilities. Topics covered in other briefs include fiscal issues, creative involvement of community-based disability organizations, and partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation. The source of the information presented below is from case studies conducted in Los Angeles, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Wilmington, Delaware; New Orleans, Louisiana; Utica, New York; and Clark County, Washington. These case studies were conducted by researchers at the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Many One-Stops reported having a variety of assistive technology devices that were purchased through grants or special set-aside money from the workforce investment board or the state. Despite equipment availability, the Colorado Springs One-Stop found that staff had either not been trained in or were not comfortable with their ability to assist someone in using the technology. Since they did not use the technology on an ongoing basis, even staff who had been trained found it challenging to use the equipment when needed. Staff in Los Angeles accurately described the situation as a catch-22. Customers did not come in to use the equipment because staff could not provide support, and staff were not familiar with the equipment because people did not come in to use it.

In addition to a widespread lack of knowledge and familiarity, some staff reflected that they did not yet feel ready to provide services to people with disabilities, and still referred to them as "somebody else's client." Anxiety existed regarding exactly how to provide effective supports. This discomfort seemed to stem from staff members' inexperience and unfamiliarity with this population.

STRATEGY: TRAINING THROUGH INCREASED EXPOSURE AND FORMAL SKILL-BUILDING PROGRAMS

Training on disability issues should be considered in the context of the need for staff to be sensitive to diverse populations. This is particularly important given the universal access of One-Stops. Training on disability issues should be part of the One-Stop's overall efforts to meet diverse needs in the community. In addition, enhancing the capacity of staff to meet the needs of people with disabilities will also enhance their ability to meet the needs of many other people with employment challenges.

Participants in ICI's research identified staff training as a crucial element in effectively supporting people with disabilities to find jobs. A variety of innovative approaches were highlighted, many that required collaborative efforts among partners as they acted as trainers, consultants, and service providers.

*The challenges that are described in this brief are not unique to the particular One-Stops referenced. Examples from specific sites are provided for illustrative purposes only.

Enlist the LWIB

Local Workforce Investment Boards (LWIBs) should begin by establishing a policymaking role in regard to training in conjunction with One-Stop staff. This could include mandating staff competencies, which should include the ability to sensitively meet and respond to the needs of people with disabilities; mandating training in certain areas; requiring ongoing staff development and continuing education; and allocating the funding and resources for staff development and training to occur.

Focus on practical, useful information that will enable staff to help job seekers

Training topics should be considered from two different perspectives: a) the service delivery needs of individuals with disabilities and b) job search issues for individuals with disabilities. Staff members need to understand how to address the needs of customers during the course of providing services and also how to assist people with disabilities in interacting with potential employers.

In regards to service delivery, topics can include such areas as the prevalence of disability in current and potential customers; disability sensitivity and etiquette; accommodating individuals with disabilities in service delivery; the use of universal design and universal learning to meet diverse needs; disability disclosure and the right to privacy in service delivery; the perception and reality of disability as an employment "barrier"; and One-Stops' legal rights and responsibilities in service delivery.

Topics related to the job search can include the employment rights of people with disabilities; the disclosure or non-disclosure of a disability to potential employers; job accommodations; disability as part of the job search planning process; the use of outside expertise; and job support issues (e.g., impact on public benefits, transportation).

The development of more practitioner-oriented material should be encouraged in order for staff to receive a better understanding of how the presence of a disability might affect a customer's experience. For example, it is much more useful for staff to have practical knowledge and tips on providing services to a person who is blind or visually impaired than extensive information on the history of services for the blind or medically oriented information on blindness. In addition to half- or full-day training, short seminars are a simple and useful tool to share information and knowledge among staff. Please see the text box on Los Angeles's EmployABILITY Partnership and training certification program for more ideas.

Tailor the training to meet the needs of staff

All staff should receive some type of basic disability etiquette or sensitivity training. Beyond that, training needs will vary depending on staff roles. Because serving individuals with disabilities is typically only one piece of a staff member's job, it is only one of the various potential topics that a staff member could be trained on. Any staff member providing core services should have knowledge of how to assist people with disabilities in the context of those services. This decision will be based partly on what level of services will be provided by "generic" staff who work with all customers and what will be needed for specific circumstances where more specialized staff may be necessary. One-Stops should decide what roles staff will play in meeting the needs of people with disabilities, and then support them in those roles through training and other efforts. The type of training as well as the training provider may depend on the partners within the local system and the availability of expertise on disability issues from VR and other entities.

Ensure that training addresses staff attitudes

Staff attitudes towards working with people with disabilities are critical for providing quality services. Leadership should promote the idea that staff can feel safe expressing feelings of anxiety and discomfort about working with job seekers with disabilities. A more frank discussion may be helpful in addressing staff members' concerns and clarifying misperceptions. In addition to sensitivity training, One-Stops should have a training component where staff members can interact, express their feelings, and support one another. One-Stops can use small group exercises as part of training to facilitate this sharing process.

Try an unconventional training approach

Staff should have opportunities to interact comfortably with job seekers with disabilities through job shadowing programs or other types of interactions that allow staff to spend time with people with a variety of disabilities on an extended basis. (See the text box describing the Braille Institute's innovative job shadowing program.) In doing so, co-workers can gain hands-on experience working with people with disabilities. Without

experience, staff often assume that they need considerable expertise to work with individuals with disabilities. Once they have had more opportunities for interaction, staff members realize that they have many of the necessary skills .

Consider the diverse needs of learners

The tenets of universal design apply to designing not only services for customers but educational opportunities for staff as well. Create learning environments to meet as wide a range of preferences and needs as possible, and use multiple training modes. Consider alternative approaches to benefit staff with various backgrounds, learning styles, abilities, and disabilities. Ideas from respondents included adult education classes, university course credit for on-the-job training, cross-training, and distance learning.

Incorporate disability issues into standard staff development activities

Standard professional growth activities can include regular staff development activities (e.g., staff meetings or monthly mandated training). This way, information on disability is not considered "extra" but just part of the regular meetings on an ongoing basis.

Create mentoring opportunities

One suggestion by a Utica interviewee received a favorable reaction from her colleagues: establish a mechanism whereby staff without disability backgrounds can be mentored by those who are highly skilled in providing accommodations. One-Stops can enlist the help of non-mandated disability agencies or VR since both have experience with and training on related to negotiating accommodations and increasing access. Mentoring opportunities also facilitate integration, relationship-building, and additional opportunities to interact with people with disabilities.

Ensure competency through a certification program

Respondents in Utica and Los Angeles referred specifically to a staff training evaluation component that required staff to demonstrate their ability to apply training curricula in real settings. Management should establish some type of formal protocol or procedure to ensure that staff are competent and receive ongoing refreshers. This idea of "staying trained" was particularly relevant when ensuring that staff were competent in using assistive technology. Many staff reported that they had been trained in how to use it, but without extensive practice these skills began to deteriorate.

Legacy Training as Part of the EmployABILITY Project

The Legacy training and certification program was launched in the fall of 2002. It was an outgrowth of the EmployABILITY Partnership, which brought together the City of Los Angeles, California Employment Development Department, California Department of Rehabilitation, the WorkSource California One-Stop system, and a variety of community-based organizations serving people with disabilities. The purpose of the training was to equip WorkSource staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to more effectively serve job seekers with disabilities.

The training program was comprised of an online course (www.employ-ability.org/legacy) and live classroom trainings by experts in the disability field. The online course had several training modules. The first introduced participants to the various strategies and skills needed to provide equal access to WorkSource programs and services. Subsequent training modules addressed seven major types of disabilities: psychiatric, cognitive and learning, vision, HIV/AIDS, communication, mobility, and substance dependence.

To earn credits towards a certification, participants had to achieve a passing grade on a test after each online module, and participate in a minimum of two live trainings. To earn additional credit, students could: write a report on how the Legacy skills were used in real-life situations to better serve customers with disabilities; conduct a training session on the subject for fellow One-Stop staff; or compile a list of local resources that could partner with the One-Stop.

There were three certification levels in development. The DSS-I training was for staff members who provided WorkSource core services, including orientation, intake, eligibility determination, and customer service. Level II, in development in fiscal year 2003-2004, was geared towards staff who deliver intensive One-Stop services such as assessment, career counseling, case management, and job development. Level III, planned for fiscal year 2004-2005, will give additional training to employees who already provide intensive services and prepare them to also perform such duties as staff training and supervision, outreach to businesses and community-based organizations, and workplace safety and accessibility monitoring.

Ensure familiarity with assistive technology

Adequate training on how to operate all facets of assistive technology should be offered to all One-Stop staff members who provide services directly to customers with disabilities, with an emphasis on staff gaining hands-on experience. In Los Angeles, a technology trainer who was blind came into each One-Stop and staff were required to work with her as if she were a customer. A staff member from the Center on Assistive Technology in Los Angeles suggested that staff be required to demonstrate time spent with different pieces of technology as part of their performance review (much like the formal certification process described earlier). This would increase retention and confidence in using the technology.

In Clark County, Washington, an ad hoc committee was established to make sure that One-Stops had the necessary assistive technology. The work group oversaw a mechanism available to share assistive technology among the partners. The work group also made certain that staff knew how to use the technology, that the equipment was available to the public, and that it functioned properly. In addition, a helpline was created that allowed staff to connect with a technology specialist who could provide assistance in using the equipment.

The Braille Institute's Job Shadowing Program in Los Angeles

The career services staff at the Braille Institute in Los Angeles collaborated with eight local One-Stop Career Centers to create a job shadowing program for students with visual impairments. The purpose of this program was twofold. First, students with visual impairments could obtain a sense of what it was like to both use and work at a One-Stop Career Center. Second, One-Stop staff had the opportunity to interact with individuals with disabilities and demonstrate and enhance their skills in using assistive technology and adaptive equipment.

Prior to the internship, One-Stop staff developed a vocational training plan for each participant in collaboration with Braille Institute career services staff. Plans included such activities as shadowing One-Stop staff (including receptionists, job developers, and case managers), welcoming new job seekers, and answering telephones. In addition, the internship provided students with the opportunity to take advantage of the resource centers. Students were assisted in online job searches and sat in on some of the trainings being conducted at the One-Stops.

In addition to the benefits provided to the students who participated, this experience provided training opportunities for staff members by increasing their comfort levels working with customers with disabilities and using assistive technology to provide these supports.

CONCLUSION

Each of these strategies can help make services more accessible. Either through formal skills-based or values training for staff, or more practical on-the-job training, building staff capabilities helps to build the capacity of the entire system. Through implementing these strategies, each site has been innovative in how it supports job seekers with diverse needs in the community.

Staff training is an important component of a multi-prong approach, but it is not a panacea that will by itself make One-Stops more accessible. Rather, training needs to be conducted as part of an overall effort to enhance One-Stops' capacity to serve people with disabilities.

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