



# Tools for Inclusion

## Self-Determination: A Fundamental Ingredient of Employment Support

By Lora Brugnaro and Jaimie Ciulla Timmons

**S**elf-determination is the process of defining one's own direction. To achieve a successful employment outcome, it is important that the job seeker actively drives and controls his or her own job search. Job seekers should participate actively in all job search activities—from determining their interests and career goals to starting a new job. Moreover, job seeker self-determination should help drive the way that employment services are offered, coordinated, and funded. This brief examines self-determination in the employment process and suggests strategies for employment professionals to apply these principles in their work.

### Let's examine further...

A self-determined person creates their own personal goals and takes responsibility for their actions. They participate actively in determining how these goals will be achieved. This can occur with or without support from others. A self-determined person knows, and fully understands, what choices are available. This promotes self-esteem and self-confidence. Believing in one's self is crucial for success.

### Self-determination and employment

In the employment process, self-determination means that the job seeker discovers their own wants and needs, determines their employment goals, and chooses the resources to achieve those goals. The job seeker is the decision-maker and is actively involved in all stages. The job seeker acts as the primary source of information, decides the direction of the job search, chooses people to participate, and controls the planning that leads to a job.

The job seeker drives the employment support process, and to the greatest extent possible is responsible for identifying his or her own strengths, job requirements, and interests.

### The Role of the Employment Professional

Employment professionals still have a role to play. At times, professionals can support job seekers to make employment-related decisions. However, the job seeker's individual preferences, interests, and contributions drive this joint decision-making process. Other input and opinions—from family members, significant others, professionals or friends—are secondary.

**Although they may act as advocates or support people, employment support professionals should not make decisions for the job seeker.**

## Self-determination when using service systems: Five key principles

The Center for Self-Determination ([www.self-determination.com](http://www.self-determination.com)) has defined five principles of self-determination. These principles relate to employment in the following ways.

- 1 Freedom.** Job seekers must understand that the freedom to pursue meaningful employment exists. They have the freedom to choose services and providers, to pursue desired employment, and to choose assistance when needed.
- 2 Authority.** Job seekers should have some degree of authority and control over how financial resources are spent on their behalf, including employment service dollars. One way to do this is by using "individual accounts"—funding packages that combine one or more sources of employment service dollars dedicated to the individual and their employment plan. The job seeker's choice and control over the use of the money are fundamental to this funding approach.
- 3 Support.** Job seekers should be able to select their support systems. This may include supports from varying agencies, organizations, and systems; family and friends; school personnel; or perhaps no one.
- 4 Responsibility.** Job seekers have the obligation to spend public employment funding and resources wisely, and to contribute to the community and the employment process.
- 5 Confirmation.** Job seekers should help improve the human services system. Examples include providing feedback on their experiences or acting as mentors to other job seekers with disabilities.

## Educating job seekers about self-determination

While some job seekers (with or without disabilities) are familiar and comfortable with exercising choice and directing themselves through services, others are not. The freedom to make choices and take risks has not always been available for some people with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities. It is important to be aware that for some job seekers, understanding that choices are available, making

decisions, and owning the responsibility for decisions are skills that need to be learned.

Job seekers who do not learn these processes may:

- » Have less of a voice in their lives
- » Be restricted in discovering preferences, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses
- » Never realize that a full array of choices even exists
- » Rely on the decisions of service providers
- » Not be able to fully access the range of services they want or participate actively in their employment search
- » Experience multiple failures because of poor decisions made on their behalf

## Applying self-determination principles to employment support

Employment staff can promote self-determination through several small actions that can greatly increase employment success.

**Take the opportunity to teach.** Discuss the concept of self-determination and provide resources as indicated. Offer some follow-up information and instruction if the job seeker is interested. In addition, a number of more formal training curricula exist and one is referenced at the end of this brief.

**Clarify expectations and consequences in understandable and accessible terms.** It can be easy to assume that job seekers understand basic expectations, the reasoning behind them, and subsequent consequences. However, this may not be the case.

**Be a helper, not a doer.** The job seeker should drive the assessment and planning processes from beginning to end. Success requires their active participation. Doing tasks for a job seeker does not enable them to handle similar situations in the future. Remain in the facilitator role, even if it makes the process slower.

**Respect the job seeker's opinions, even if they are different from your own.** If a job seeker does not want a particular service, accommodation, job, or person involved, respect these wishes. While you can explain your perspective, the final decision is theirs.

**Allow the job seeker to make decisions, even those that may seem counterproductive.** Although this can be challenging for a counselor, job seekers need to have “the dignity of risk”—the ability to take chances and opportunities even if they might not succeed.

**Always ask for suggestions on how to improve the process.** Periodically ask the job seeker for suggestions and feedback throughout the service delivery process. Leave room to allow the job seeker to change their mind or course of action.

**Stay focused on accessibility.** To the greatest extent possible, employment providers should offer an open and universally accessible environment where job seekers can make choices about services and take advantage of resources without physical or programmatic obstacles.

**Provide opportunities to control funding.** Use personal budgets, individual training accounts, and other forms of individualized funding that provide choice and control in the employment support process.

**Don't underestimate the importance of an assessment phase.** Assessment is a prime opportunity for an employment professional to understand the job seeker's level of self-determination as well as their employment preferences and ideas. Use this time to assess self-determination skill and knowledge.

## Some points to observe:

- » Does the job seeker come to the process with a plan in mind?
- » Are they aware of their work strengths and weaknesses?
- » Is the job seeker too easily satisfied?
- » Do they feel comfortable speaking their mind or asking questions?
- » Does the job seeker perceive a range of options and show an understanding of those options?
- » Is the job seeker always in agreement—or disagreement?

Counselors can open up this conversation simply by including an intake question about the job seeker's baseline knowledge of self-determination.

### Using Assessment to Understand Job Seeker Self-Determination

The career assessment process lets the job seeker and employment professional learn the job seeker's likes, dislikes, career goals, and visions for the future. This self-awareness is fundamental to exerting self-determination. Therefore, the assessment phase can also be a natural time to identify the job seeker's level of self-determination. Once both the counselor and job seeker understand this background context, they can make informed decisions about employment goals and effective service strategies.

## Carlos's Employment Planning Process: Promoting Self-Determination

Carlos went to his local One-Stop Career Center looking for part-time employment. He disclosed to the front desk staff that he had a hearing impairment, received Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and wanted to return to work. He also had difficulty reading and writing, perhaps due to an undiagnosed learning disability.

Paula, the One-Stop staff person, communicated with Carlos by speaking clearly and using pen and paper. She explained the range of services available at the One-Stop, the enrollment procedures, the requirements and expectations of each person involved, and the process to request accommodations should they be needed. Paula then gave Carlos the opportunity to choose which services he thought would be most beneficial, and invited him to return for a more detailed intake/assessment meeting. Carlos elected to take her up on this offer.

At this detailed assessment meeting, Paula asked questions that helped Carlos identify his past employment history, his interests and skills, and the other service providers and personal acquaintances involved in assisting him. Carlos explained that he was working with the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, his state Vocational Rehabilitation department, and a local faith-based organization. His brother provided some financial support. After collecting this information with Carlos, Paula asked him to consider how he could use these resources towards his employment goals, and to develop a plan for leveraging them. She explained that decisions were up to Carlos and would be respected. Paula also asked Carlos whom he wanted to coordinate his services. Carlos wanted to coordinate his own services with his brother's help.

During the next phase of the assessment process, Carlos said that he wanted to work in a customer service position. Although Paula was concerned that this might not be the best option, she supported his decision. Carlos decided to enroll in a computer training program funded through a WIA Individual Training Account (ITA). After that, he was ready to embark on the interview and job search process. In the end, Carlos found an administrative job that used his new computer skills. Although not technically a customer service position, the job's responsibilities allowed Carlos to interact occasionally with customers.

### Highlights

- Accessibility was considered throughout the process. Upon entry, Paula used pen and paper to clearly inform Carlos about the range of services. She offered additional accommodations.
- Carlos was given the freedom to choose which services he felt best met his needs, which resources he wanted to access and how, and who would coordinate the process.
- Paula recognized that a detailed assessment meeting provided an opportunity to explore self-determination. In conjunction with her, Carlos identified employment goals and existing resources he could tap.
- Paula supported Carlos's decision to pursue his identified employment goal, even though it was not the direction that she would have chosen.
- Carlos was given the opportunity to control the use of his ITA by choosing a training program that was aligned with his career goal.

## Reaping the benefits

Focusing on self-determination principles in employment increases the job seeker's independence. This can decrease or change the responsibilities of employment professionals. The following changes may happen:

- » Job seekers become more comfortable and confident using self-directed services.
- » Job seekers improve their ability to navigate the system. The skills needed to do this—for instance, the ability to identify and maximize resources, manage and organize a job search, and make decisions after evaluating available options—transfer to the employment setting.
- » Job seekers are more likely to experience the full range of services without feeling the need for “specialized” services.
- » Job seekers increase their power and satisfaction by directing how resources are spent.
- » Job seekers take on more responsibility for completing job search tasks, thus freeing staff time and resources.
- » When job seekers are more self-determined, staff roles may turn away from case management and turn towards customer service.

As job seekers' capabilities and self-determination increase, the fundamental job of employment professionals becomes to connect the job seeker with supports and resources to facilitate the process.

## Conclusion

Self-determination in employment means that job seekers discover their own wants and needs, determine their employment goals, and choose the resources to achieve those goals. Therefore, job seeker self-determination should drive employment services' coordination, funding, and implementation. Promoting self-determination during the employment process can increase the likelihood of employment success. It not only expands job seekers' independence but allows employment professionals to enjoy new advantages as well.

## Resources

### Center for Self-Determination

401 East Stadium Boulevard  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104  
734-213-5220 (voice)  
[www.self-determination.com](http://www.self-determination.com)

The Center for Self-Determination is a working collaborative of individuals and organizations committed to the principles of self-determination.

### UIC National Research and Training Center on Psychiatric Disability

104 South Michigan Ave., Suite 900  
Chicago, IL 60603  
312-422-8180 (voice)  
312-422-0740 (fax)  
312-422-0706 (TTY)  
[www.psych.uic.edu/UICNRTC](http://www.psych.uic.edu/UICNRTC)

The National Research and Training Center (NRTC) on Psychiatric Disability is a five-year program of research, training, technical assistance, and dissemination activities designed to promote self-determination among people with psychiatric disabilities.

### Tennessee Customized Employment Project

Ms. Windie Wilson, Assistant Director  
Workforce Connections  
2247 Western Ave.  
Knoxville, TN 37950  
865-544-5200 (voice)  
[www.tceponline.com](http://www.tceponline.com)

The Tennessee Customized Employment and Workforce Action projects provide a self-determination skills training to job seekers with disabilities who are using the One-Stop Career Center. There is also training for One-Stop staff on the principles of self-determination. The action grantees are working to adapt this self-determination curriculum to suit the needs of all One-Stop customers and to fit into the One-Stop workshop infrastructure. The projects are funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor.

## Training curriculum

### OHSU Center on Self-Determination/Oregon Institute on Disability and Development

[www.ohsu.edu/oidd/CSDI](http://www.ohsu.edu/oidd/CSDI)

The mission of the OHSU Center on Self-Determination is to identify, develop, validate, and communicate policies and practices that promote the self-determination of people with and without disabilities. The website includes publications, projects, workshops, and technical assistance opportunities.

### For more information, contact:

Jaimie Timmons  
Institute for Community Inclusion  
UMass Boston  
100 Morrissey Boulevard  
Boston, Massachusetts 02125  
617.287.4300 (v); 617.287.4350 (TTY)  
[jaimie.timmons@umb.edu](mailto:jaimie.timmons@umb.edu)



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