

EFFECTIVE TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT CONSULTANTS: JOB DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES

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Suggested audience for this brief: Employment managers, employment supervisors, employment staff serving an IDD population

BACKGROUND

Great strides have been made by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in the area of employment. Every day, people with IDD seek individual jobs and employers hire people with IDD. Support services have evolved to provide greater access to the professional supports needed to help individuals find work and stay employed.

Despite these advancements, major challenges still exist. The most recent data from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 21.1% of people with disabilities are working a paid job, compared to 69.7 % of the general population. Of those in the labor force, people with disabilities face an unemployment rate that is nearly double of those without disabilities.

The training and development of employment consultants who support job seekers with IDD can help with improved job placement outcomes. These include a higher number of placements and placements with greater pay and more work hours (Butterworth, Migliore, Nord, & Gelb, in press). To be successful at placing and supporting individuals, employment consultants require an extensive skill set in the areas of rehabilitation and business. They also must be proficient at many technical and complex tasks.

Employment consultants must have an extensive understanding of the skills and interests of each job seeker, as well as the needs of the businesses in their community. For example, employment consultants may have to implement complex disability supports, person-centered career planning, and creative job development and business practices. They also need to network, build employer relationships, and practice business consultation, such as helping to implement

job accommodations and employer incentives (Callahan, Shumpert, & Condon, 2009; Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007; Phillips et al., 2009; Carlson, Smith, & Rapp, 2008).

Ultimately, the role of the employment consultant is to identify the needs of the business community and match them with skilled and interested job seekers who can fulfill these needs. This may be done by way of an existing job or may require negotiation among the employment consultant, job seeker, and the business to create or customize a job (Callahan, 2003; Griffin et al., 2008). Despite what is known about promising practices in employment supports, employment consultants were found to underuse these practices in the field (Migliore, Butterworth, Nord, Cox, & Gelb, in press).

This Institute Brief summarizes the key elements of a training and support approach designed to improve job development practices. Employment consultants who participated supported more individuals to enter employment, and supported people to achieve higher-quality jobs with more hours and higher levels of pay, than a control group who had not yet received training.

FOCUSED TRAINING CONTENT

High-quality and effective training is directly linked to the best practices of a professional. For employment consultants, training must be designed with a focus on promising practices related to job development and employment supports. When employment consultants are able to identify the skills, strengths, and interests of a job seeker, and then match those with the needs of an employer, there is the highest probability of achieving employment placement and success.

A number of competency sets provide the foundation for most employment consultant training programs. Two well-known national associations in the employment and disability fields are the Association of



Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) and APSE. Both of these organizations are dedicated to improving employment outcomes for job seekers with IDD. Since their competencies and curricula are based on best practices on employment for people with disabilities, they served as part of the basis for this training project.

The goal of the project was to improve the number of new job placements an employment consultant developed, and the quality of individual job outcomes. Outcomes were evaluated in terms of an individual’s interests, hours worked, and wages. Core competencies were influenced by the ACRE and APSE curricula, current research on job development practices, and the following promising practices:

UNDERSTANDING JOB SEEKERS’ PREFERENCES AND SKILLS WITHIN A PERSON-CENTERED CAREER PLANNING APPROACH. This means spending time with job seekers, talking with people who know job seekers well, observing job seekers in work and non-work environments, using job shadowing or situational assessment, and developing a personal career profile.

KNOWING HOW TO FIND JOBS. This involves searching the local labor market, involving job seekers’ personal networks in identifying job leads, using job trials and informational interviews, and developing a job-seeker portfolio.

KNOWING HOW TO CONNECT WITH EMPLOYERS. Employment consultants must explore employers’ needs, develop meaningful proposals, and negotiate customized job descriptions.

UNDERSTANDING IMPLICATIONS AFTER THE HIRE. This entails identifying and facilitating natural workplace supports, addressing work incentives, and fostering relationships with employers.

FROM TRAINING TO DOING

In order to help participants move from learning to doing, training should be delivered using multiple formats that include concepts based on best

practices of employment, discussion, and practice and application of skills.

GOAL-FOCUSED. Each training day included a presentation with specific goals that were addressed through different modes of training to fit different learning styles.

DISCUSSION. Ongoing discussion was encouraged between participants and trainers.

PRACTICE AND APPLICATION. The opportunity to practice what was taught, apply concepts, and demonstrate skills through interactive exercises and fieldwork have proven to be very effective. Table 1 presents a sampling of the small group interactive exercises used throughout the training sessions. These included thought exercises that required planning and brainstorming, and also practical activities that addressed core skills and strategies. These included working with employers and identifying job-seeker networks and interests.

Table 1: Interactive Exercises

Exercise	Delivery Method	Purpose
1) Scenario and problem solving	In small groups, ECs read a specific scenario, devised a strategy to address the challenge, and reported to the larger group.	To apply knowledge to concrete scenarios and learn from professional peers.
2) Person-centered career planning	ECs conducted a mock person-centered career planning meeting and practiced completing career planning tools.	To practice conducting person-centered career planning.
3) Elevator speech	ECs wrote, practiced, and critiqued a short introductory statement to engage employers, known as an elevator pitch or elevator speech.	To demonstrate effective job-development communication strategies.
4) Fieldwork: employer engagement	ECs went into the surrounding business community, met employers, and learned about employers’ business needs.	To develop the skills and confidence needed to speak to employers in the community.
5) Fieldwork: networking	ECs completed a personal networking tool with a job seeker.	To help the job seeker establish their own personal network.
6) Fieldwork: job-seeker observation	ECs observed a job seeker participating in three different environments and documented their findings.	To practice using observation as a strategy to learn about job-seeker strengths, interests, and abilities.

A highlight was the requirement in Exercise 4 that participants connect with employers and identify employer needs by going into the community where the training was held and talking with employers about their business needs. Employment consultants were also required to complete a networking form with one job seeker, to help the job seeker and the employment consultant learn about the job seeker's network and see how valuable networking is for career exploration and job development. Employment consultants received a manual with tools, resources, and additional readings related to best practices in job development.

ON-THE-JOB MENTORING

Training participants need ongoing support to incorporate their new knowledge and skills into their jobs. In order to make sure trainees had the opportunity to apply what they learned in the research study model, mentoring was provided to each employment consultant by the training team. This consisted of two two-hour face-to-face sessions. Mentoring was provided at the employment consultant's work setting and through ongoing phone and email support.

The purpose of these sessions was to assist employment consultants in working through challenges related to job development and effectively applying what they learned to their practice. Since this component of the intervention was tailored to each employment consultant, the issues and challenges addressed by mentors varied widely. Some employment consultants sought assistance with working with employers, strategizing specific accommodation needs for job seekers, and brainstorming new ways to engage employers. Others requested more hands-on mentoring in their community while supporting a specific job seeker or connecting with local businesses.

In all cases, the mentor provided practice and support in job development and relationship building with employers. The mentoring experience also provided the opportunity for employment consultants to review the training information and activities and put them into practice.

CONCLUSION

As employment support organizations and trainers look to improve training and development for employment consultants, it is necessary to take a few important considerations into account. Training should be competency-based, addressing knowledge, skills, and attitudes deemed critical for effectively providing job placements, building relationships with employers, and providing job skills and supports to job seekers. Additionally, training should be directly linked to an accepted competency set that emphasizes the use of promising practices in employment supports for people with IDD.

In order to be as effective as possible, training needs to provide a variety of learning methods. This makes it more widely accessible to learners with differing learning styles. Finally, demonstration, practice, and ongoing support ensure employment consultants can apply promising practices in their work.

Organizations and trainers must create opportunities for employment consultants to develop new skills and feel confident in using those skills with employers and job seekers. One of the most important ways to create learning opportunities is through competency-based training that encompasses best practices of employment as well as ongoing support through mentoring. When employment consultants are prepared with skills and support, and have the opportunity to practice and incorporate what they have learned into their jobs, there is the highest likelihood of improving employment outcomes for people with IDD.

Benefits of Mentoring

Mentoring emphasized problem solving and best practices. One of the most effective strategies was participating in job development with the employment consultant by modeling and then observing interaction with businesses in the community. This strategy can also be used to support career planning, networking with family, and other areas the employment consultant may need support in.

Curriculum Resources

**Association of Community
Rehabilitation Educators
(ACRE) Curriculum**
www.acreeducators.org

**APSE Supported Employment
Competencies**
[www.apse.org/publications/
positions.cfm](http://www.apse.org/publications/positions.cfm)

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