

## SUPPORT THROUGH MENTORSHIP: ACCESSIBLE SUPERVISION OF EMPLOYEES WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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**Suggested audience for this brief:** employers, employment professionals, self-advocates

### INTRODUCTION

Effective supervision of employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities can be challenging for businesses that may not have experience in hiring people with diverse support requirements. This is largely due to the relatively low participation rates of people with disabilities in the workforce. This is, thankfully, changing as more businesses are seeing the value of diversifying their workforce, which includes hiring people with diverse cognitive abilities like people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

### WHAT IS AN INTELLECTUAL OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY?

According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities\*, an "intellectual disability" is a disability that involves significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18 and encompasses a wide range of conditions, types, and levels. Intellectual disability is caused by factors that can be physical, genetic, and/or social." Developmental disability, on the other hand, is a broader term that refers to a "severe, chronic disability [that is] attributable to a physical or mental

impairment [and is] likely to continue indefinitely, resulting in substantial functional limitations in three or more areas of major life activity.\*\*"

Effective supervision of employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities, if done properly, is not different than effective supervision of people without disabilities. Supervision strategies that we have found helpful focus on: using clear and consistent communication, being aware of who supports the employee on and off the job, assisting the employee in understanding the work place culture, taking a long-term view of the employee's career, and taking steps to improve the employee's skills and abilities. Using our experiences as supervisors, coworkers and the employment, we are sharing successful strategies and offering concrete strategies for how to mentor and support professional growth of individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Like everyone else, individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities are very different from each other. Some descriptive terms you may hear include autism spectrum disorder, learning disability, and Down syndrome, but people with intellectual or developmental disabilities come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities. The most important thing to keep in mind is that employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities are employees and people first.



## HOW WILL I KNOW IF ONE OF MY EMPLOYEES HAS INTELLECTUAL OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

This question is an important one for supervisors, because you might think that it would be useful to know how to support your employee better. To know for certain, however, your employee will need to disclose that they have intellectual or developmental disabilities. Sometimes they will let you know during the interview process; other times they will let you know after they have obtained the job. The important thing to remember is that it is unacceptable to ask a job applicant or employee if they have an intellectual or developmental disability. To do so is against the law and a violation of their civil rights (United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; [www.diversityworld.com/Disability/jobseek.htm](http://www.diversityworld.com/Disability/jobseek.htm)). As a supervisor, the important thing is to know what your employee needs in order to do an excellent job. You may find that it may take a few weeks for you and the employee to decide which support strategies to use. The employee will benefit from actually doing the job and you from observing them. Then, together, you can discuss the strategies that will lead to success. Asking an employee what they need to excel is always a fair question and one that everyone should be able to respond to if they expect to be hired.

## SUPERVISORY LESSONS LEARNED

Our experiences supervising individuals with disabilities have helped us learn a few helpful lessons along the way. While every employer and employee is different, we think these lessons are helpful for employers who are concerned about how to best supervise individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. We also asked an employee of ours who identifies as having an intellectual or developmental disability to comment on these lessons. These are indicated in the side bars corresponding to each lesson.

### PARTNER WITH THE INDIVIDUAL'S EMPLOYMENT SPECIALIST

Sometimes individuals work with employment specialists to help them obtain and maintain a job. Employment specialists may also be called job developers or job coaches and they often work for an organization that provides work related supports to individuals. You may have met the individual's employment specialist during the hiring process or while they were supporting the individual on the job; often employment specialists check in with an individual's supervisor to assess the individual's on-the-job performance.

There are many ways you can work with employment specialists. For example, employment specialists can help you develop a task checklist, brainstorm with you and the employee about work design, provide information about strategies that may help them in the workplace, provide the individual training in specific tasks, facilitate relationships between the individual and their co-workers, and assist the individual with basic employment skills (ex. maintaining good health, attendance and hygiene). Employment specialists are also workplace consultants. and can also assist you as the supervisor. They can help you address concerns you may have about the employee, provide additional feedback to the employee on their on-the-job performance, and offer helpful suggestions on how to operate your workplace more efficiently.

*Having empathy and compassion is essential to open communication and establishing a partnership. Part of the partnership is having an awareness of who supports me to become a better employee on the job.*

– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability

## 2

### KEEP IT SIMPLE, BUT APPROPRIATE

Another strategy that we found useful in our supervision was to “keep it simple”. This didn’t mean that we didn’t discuss complex ideas with the employee; what it did mean is that we used language that was easy to understand and clarified with the individual their understanding of what we had said. In fact, using simple language generally is a good approach with all employees.

#### How to keep it simple:

- ▶ Use clear and concrete language
- ▶ Use short sentences that communicate one main idea
- ▶ Use concrete, direct instructions: do not “suggest” or “imply.”
- ▶ Avoid jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations
- ▶ Check for understanding. After each piece of information ask, “What do you think about this?” etc. Ask the employee to reflect back to you their understanding of what needs to happen. By asking this question we often found that we needed to rephrase the information we provided or the task we wanted the individual to complete.
- ▶ Be aware of body language and facial expressions. These can convey whether the messages are being understood.

*Having the right communication when there was a lack of understanding and confusion actually taking place with my co-workers [is really important]. If I could change anything [what] would it be? I would say that [some projects] were intellectually confusing because of all the language. And the terminology that is being used with the materials [was difficult to understand]. I was feeling that it wasn't as user-friendly as it should have been. I think that it could use some improvement with understanding the text in a better way that could be of better use and how everything was being explained in a more basic user-friendly way.*

– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability

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### HAVE A PLAN FOR THE EMPLOYEES JOB RESPONSIBILITIES

Developing a plan for our own work responsibilities is something many people do, however you may not be accustomed to having a plan for your employees. Successful supervisors of employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities is assisted if a plan is prepared that is explicit about the employee’s responsibilities. The plan should be reviewed frequently with the employee. Sharing the plan with the employee will allow the employee time to ask questions about the task and make sure they understand their responsibilities. For example, during supervisory meetings, we found that over time, doing first hand scheduling with the employee helped us to understand and plan out her workflow in a way that she could do it and ensure it was done in a timely fashion. In our case, we built the “plan” by entering tasks into the employees Outlook calendar.

#### How to plan ahead and communicate your plan:

- ▶ Know whether or not your employee can pick up a new job responsibility on the “fly” or may need more support and training.
- ▶ Know what you are going to ask your employee to do before they ask you what they should do next.
- ▶ Know who is the best person to provide instruction on a new task. Is it you, a co-worker, or his/her employment specialist?
- ▶ Know the best way to give the employee instructions: verbal, written, hands-on demonstration, or video.
- ▶ Consider developing a checklist in written, picture, or another format that can easily be reordered. An employment specialist can help with this.

*Open communication and being honest with an employee about what you're thinking really helps. It helps me know what I should be doing.*

– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability

# 4

## TALK TO YOUR EMPLOYEE AS A PERSON FIRST.

Another thing that good supervisors do is develop and maintain a rapport with each employee that they supervise. This can be especially important to people with disabilities, who can sometimes face challenges that can be both structural (e.g., people with intellectual or developmental disabilities often work part time hours, offering fewer opportunities to interact) and related to attitudes of others about people with disabilities (i.e., perception that people with disabilities are less capable). Employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities benefit from positive personal relationships with their supervisors like anyone else does.

### How to get to know the individual and let the individual get to know you

- ▶ Demonstrate respect by saying hello, goodbye, please, and thank you
- ▶ Let the employee know about your own interests and hobbies outside of work
- ▶ Be sure to introduce the employee to coworkers and remember to do so when new people come into the business
- ▶ Make sure the individual is included in meetings and social gatherings. This may require thinking about adapting his/her work schedule

During the “adjustment phase,” it was vitally important for us as supervisors to be cognizant of how we communicated. By being concrete and positive, it helped to lay the groundwork for a working relationship where mutual respect was the norm. One of us also goes to the same gym as our employee, so this served as a common frame of reference to talk about a mutual area of interest. We also frequently talk about our families, what we do on holidays, etc. All of these examples are organic in nature, but help build a good solid relationship with the employee.

*It is important to show a personal interest in others in their lives.*

*– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability*

# 5

## BE FLEXIBLE TO THE INDIVIDUAL'S NEEDS BUT CLEAR IN YOUR EXPECTATIONS

In our experience, developing a balance between flexibility and high expectations is key to success. Flexibility could mean different things in different circumstances. Often times, it is as simple as being open to a quick 15 minute break to accommodate a medical need or it could mean negotiating flex time to accommodate for a personal situation. Being flexible to the individual's needs does not, however, mean sacrificing the quality or promptness of the work that needs to be done. It means keeping yourself accountable to the person's performance. Being flexible does not mean doing the work for the person.

### How to be flexible while maintaining high expectations

- ▶ Negotiate flexible work hours if needed with the employee, but enforce those hours.
- ▶ Talk about planning issues: how far in advance do you make a schedule?
- ▶ Identify whether the employee has the skills needed to complete the task: such as technology skills and if the employee needs contextual or topical information.
- ▶ What support does an employment specialist provide versus support provided by a supervisor? Employment specialists may be more focused on process, supervisors focused on outcomes.
- ▶ You need to make it clear job that tasks are achievable; don't make them seem too hard. Communicate that success takes patience and is a dynamic, unfolding process and that you are supportive of learning and adapting to getting the job done.

*Be a good and positive role model for your employee with the need to be learning about how to give and take about what to expect. It is important to be in sync with each other. It is important to be mindful of other people.*

*– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability*

# 6

## **WORK DIRECTLY WITH THE EMPLOYEE ON A PROJECT.**

We found that we did our best supervision when we worked on the same projects together. This allowed us to have a sense of what was happening during the employee's work week, the project responsibilities that had been assigned to the employee, and help the employee identify any tasks that they needed help completing. Working side-by-side allowed us to see how the person works without completely relying solely on oral descriptions. It also allowed us the opportunity to make suggestions to the employees' co-workers on things they could do to make the entire project a success.

### **How to keep meaningfully involved:**

- ▶ Be involved in the same projects as the employee.
- ▶ Attend staff meetings with the employee.
- ▶ Check in with co-workers to see what they think is working well and isn't working well for the employee.

*I really enjoyed doing that and going to the different work sites and interviewing the young people with intellectual or developmental disabilities ...[and] connecting with them at their level... I loved the process of doing the interviews and having to do the reconciling with my teammates for after having the interviews... ... Working with my teammates is what I look forward to every time.*

– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability

# 7

## **PRIORITIZE THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT OF YOUR EMPLOYEE.**

Another effective supervisory strategy is to recognize that every employee is on a career path. In order to grow professionally, all employees have the expectation that they will improve skills and receive the support to do so. This is no different for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

### **How to support opportunities for career development**

- ▶ Mentoring and reporting and noting the difference between the two. Mentoring is about guidance through one's career; reporting is about updating on the progress of project "to-dos."
- ▶ Periodically ask yourself, "What additional responsibilities could the individual complete?"
- ▶ Periodically ask the employee, "Is there anyone's job at this company you would like to learn more about?" If there is, encourage the employee to set up a time to talk to the individual about their job.
- ▶ Periodically ask the employee, "Is there anything that happens at work you would like to learn more about?"
- ▶ Take the time during formal performance evaluations to identify professional development and leadership experiences that meet the employee's goals such as education and skills training.

*I would have to say that I have really found my way and really finding that I can do anything as long as I can communicate my professional needs... I really have grown to love what I do.*

– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability

## BUILDING A SUPPORT NETWORK OF COWORKERS

We all have co-workers who are not our supervisors that we know we can ask for information or assistance on-the-job. Developing these networks of co-workers are important for all employees including employees with intellectual or developmental disabilities, but people with intellectual or developmental disabilities may need some encouragement to reach out to their colleagues. There are ways you can encourage other employees to be a resource and encourage the employee to reach out to their co-workers.

### How you can encourage connections in the workplace:

- ▶ Make sure the employee feels included in the workplace by encouraging them to interact with their co-workers. Ways to do this include: letting the employee know where their co-workers eat lunch, making sure the employee is included in workday celebrations (ex. birthday celebrations) and out of work activities (ex. the office softball team or community service).
- ▶ Be a “bridge” between the employee with an intellectual or developmental disability and other employees. Let the employee know which of their co-workers would be a good person to ask for help, and let the co-worker know that you think they would be a good resource of the employee.

Strategies to facilitate co-worker involvement can be simple, yet challenging. For example, our employee worked part time, coming in two half days a week. This presents some issues for building and maintaining rapport with fellow co-workers simply due to limited time. We tried as supervisors to communicate when employee social gatherings were taking place in work and out of work, regardless if the employee was in the office. Doing this made the employee feel more comfortable with other co-workers when she interacted with them in the office on projects.

*The need to have validation coming from co-workers can be important, especially when doing project team assignments. Being socially active at the workplace does make you a better person to work with. It helps to improve social etiquette with being in the workplace.*

– Employee with an intellectual or developmental disability

## REFERENCES

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