Summary

National Forum on Natural Supports

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The Supported Employment Initiative originated in the 1980s based on the belief that all people with severe disabilities could work productively in real jobs in the community if provided with individualized supports. In the early years it was assumed that the support required would come from professionals similar to those who had provided training and support in segregated settings and workshops. In supported employment these professionals would be called job coaches or employment training specialists. Their specialty would be the ability to analyze and arrange integrated work settings, to help persons with disabilities learn key job tasks, to monitor performance on an ongoing basis, and to assume responsibility for problem solving and retraining whenever needed. Somewhat surprisingly, co-workers in select companies began demonstrating the capacity to provide much of this support for employees with disabilities. This development has been called *natural support.*

Natural support moved from concept to federal regulation in the span of only a few years. To date, there is no commonly recognized or accepted definition of the notion. Case studies and experiential data suggest that co-workers have the capacity and willingness to provide training and support to employees with disabilities. There is, however, limited documentation of strategies for building and maintaining natural supports. National discussion of the potential benefits and related risks of this new way of arranging employment support for persons with disabilities has also been limited. There are important questions that must be considered and discussed:

- How will we keep the idea of natural support from being added as yet another notch in the "array of services"?

- How will we assure that natural supports does not become a socially acceptable term for "place and pray"?

- How can we insure that funders do not consider natural supports as an excuse to reduce fiscal commitment to citizens with disability?

- How do we make certain that persons with disabilities have pivotal roles in the development of natural supports?

In June 1993, The Employment Network at the University of Oregon sponsored a National Forum on Natural Supports. The Forum was held in San Francisco and included more than 80 participants from all parts of the country. The purpose of the Forum was to discuss and debate the concept of natural supports, consider examples of applications, challenge assumptions, and begin to develop a better and shared understanding of both the current status and future directions of natural supports.

The Forum was moderated by Michael Callahan, with commentary by John O'Brien. The format involved two days of large and small group discussions on specific issues related to natural supports. Discussions included the following topics:

/ Features of natural supports

/ Natural supports in a larger context: Consumer perspectives

/ Systemic issues and changing roles for professionals and agencies

/ Research ideas and issues

/ Implications for staff training and development

- Policy implications

This paper summarizes and synthesizes these discussions.

Features of Natural Supports

To date, natural support is largely defined by *features* derived from case studies and from values-based descriptions. These features seek to frame the concept in terms of the types of assistance that are typical of the supports provided to any employee in the workplace. There was a consensus among Forum participants that a precise definition is undesirable at this point in the development of natural support. Description by features, rather than definition should encourage innovation.

Forum participants identified features that fall into several larger areas. In general, natural support occurs when:

- Services (implementation, training and support) for employees with disabilities are consistent with the culture of the workplace.

- Workers experience typical employment status.

- Supports are varied, flexible, individualized and extend beyond the workplace.

- Employers and co-workers have ownership of support related decisions and problem solving.

- Professionals are seen as external agents. Their role is to help identify, develop and facilitate the typical or indigenous supports of the workplace.

There are, however, a number of issues and unanswered questions pertaining to current descriptions. Table 1 lists some of the issues identified by participants. The issues identified in Table 1 fall into two areas. The first area involves a range of implementation issues. Further development of the concept requires information about specific practices that lead to "natural" co-worker supports. Another area of concern related to implementation is evaluation. People with disabilities, funders, and service providers seek information that will help them decide if

natural supports are effective, and more importantly, if they are more effective than what participants referred to as "traditional supported employment".

Table 1. Features, Issues and Unanswered Questions Related to Descriptions of Natural Supports

Features	Issues/Questions
Supports consistent with culture of workplace	• How are "acceptable cultures" identified? • What methods can be employed to identify and tap into "natural" forms of assistance that already occur in a work setting? • Is it ever appropriate to attempt to improve the culture of a particular work site?
Workers experience typical employment status	• Are employees with disabilities hired and supported in the same ways as other employees? • What are the best methods for recruiting co-workers to help provide natural supports? • How do natural supports relate to "reasonable accommodation" as described in the ADA?
Employers and co-workers have ownership	• How is employer capacity to hire and support persons with disabilities assessed and enhanced? • How are individual interests in long term stability and career advancement respected and supported? • How is it possible to maintain reciprocal relationships with co-workers?
Professionals are external agents	• When is release of control by professionals actually a failure in long term commitment? • What roles do professionals assume? • What mix of employer supports and external supports is acceptable? Who makes these decisions?
Support is varied, flexible and extends beyond the workplace	• If company personnel assume ownership, what is the ongoing role of professionals? • How is it possible to influence interactions that occur outside the work setting in unobtrusive ways? • Who assumes responsibility for tracking the success and needs of supported employees and co-workers? • How are the interests of various stakeholders, especially the employee with disabilities, respected and supported?

Third, there are concerns about the implications of giving up responsibility for the well-being of the individual with disabilities. Concerns in this area are inextricably tied to the assumption that the status quo, control by the social service system, serves the best interests of consumers. These concerns should not be taken lightly. It is possible that some providers and some university advocates could inadvertently set up a new version of "place and pray" by abdicating both responsibility and the means of influencing individual employment outcomes. Clearly, more information on implementation practices and outcomes is needed. It is also appropriate to refer to new developments in choice and self-determination for people with disabilities.

Natural Supports In a Larger Context: Consumer Perspectives

The context. Opportunities for natural supports are not confined to the workplace. Participation in community life extends beyond work and the opportunities for social and support networks can be found in other community settings. In addition, networks that develop in the workplace may spread into other areas of community life. Forum participants noted a number of points relevant to considering natural supports in the context of a "whole life".

- Pre-existing personal goals and relationships influence an individual's employment goals and plans.

- Work provides the opportunity to develop relationships that may extend beyond the workplace.

- The commitment to facilitate natural supports should not be confined to the hours spent working.

- Personalized planning must address the development of typical supports in all aspects of a person's life.

Perspectives of participants with disabilities. The ideas associated with natural supports have primarily been discussed by social services professionals. The most important voices in these discussions belong to people with disabilities. In Table 2 concerns voiced by people with disabilities who participated in the Forum are juxtaposed with the notions identified above regarding a "whole life" view of natural support.

Table 2. Consumer Perspectives on a Whole Life Approach to Natural Support

Whole Life Notions	Consumer Perspectives
Personal goals and relationships may influence employment plans.	• Some parents are afraid to let go. • We often begin from a place of limited socialization. • Person-centered planning can provide a place to discuss interests and dreams. • Cultures that impede personal communication should be avoided.
Work provides the opportunity to build relationships that extend beyond work.	• Fear of rejection can prohibit you from asking co-workers to lunch. • We need to know when to approach co-workers. • Start by asking co-workers to take breaks on the job. Let them know when you take breaks. • Use interests outside of work to start conversations. • Find out co-workers' interests. • Offer co-workers assistance. • Some co-workers do not speak English. • Learn key phrases and learn about other cultures. • Look for co-workers who seem receptive (e.g., same age, gender, interests).
The commitment to facilitate natural support cannot be confined to work hours.	• Job coaches should help identify co-workers outside interests. • Job coaches should help with communication, but they should not interfere.
Personalized planning must address supports in all aspects of life.	• Job coaches should know our interests outside of work. • People need friends outside of work too. • We may need to find a different job where co-workers are more receptive.

It is interesting to note that consumer perspectives include a mix of concerns and suggested strategies for dealing with concerns (with strategies far outnumbering concerns). Many of the strategies suggested by people with disabilities tended to be ones that they saw themselves carrying out. Of the 80 persons participating in the Forum, only nine were people with disabilities. The topics discussed in the Forum and reported here will benefit from discussion and revision by self-advocates.

Systemic Issues and Changing Roles for Agencies and Professionals

The federal, state and local agency structures in which we work are the result of assumptions about what services people need, and who provides these services. Natural supports challenge these assumptions by emphasizing the participation of unpaid co-workers and community members. Natural supports will change the nature of our relationships with people with disabilities and employers. These changes will influence how services are planned, funded and organized. Forum participants identified the following points related to systems, agencies, and the need for professional change.

- Decision making practices at all levels must change to include individuals with disabilities.

- Agencies at all levels of the system must invest in person-centered planning processes.

- Individual professionals and agencies should invest in helping people with disabilities expand personal relationships.

- Funders and service providers should treat employers as primary customers.

- Relationships with employers should be long-term.

- Job development should be based on "one person at a time" activities.

- Changes in the interests and culture of the American workplace must be seen as integral to the interests and culture of the social service system.

- Support issues (e.g., transportation, communication, accommodation) should be discussed as workforce issues rather than disability issues.

This list presents challenges resulting from a shift from "traditional supported employment" to natural supports. In addition, there are subtle discrepancies in this list. Following are some of these discrepancies. The essential discrepancy concerns the need to ensure that people with disabilities are the primary decision makers at all levels. This calls for attention in the planning and implementation of natural supports.

Table 3. Systems Change Issues and Discrepancies

Suggestions	Issues
Employers should be treated as customers	• How do we maintain a primary commitment to consumers that assures their determination of service planning and delivery? • At every level in the system, how do we maintain balance in relationships with employers and people with disabilities?
Relationships with business should be long term and reciprocal	• What are the components of these long-term and reciprocal relationships? • What indicators do we use to evaluate relationships? • How do consumers obtain access to the information needed to evaluate these relationships?
Decision making at all levels should include consumer involvement	• How do planners, funders and administrators include consumers in decision making in ways that are timely, effective and "natural"?

Issues for Future Research

Research in areas related to natural supports, the involvement of co-workers, and the social and support networks of employees with disabilities has a short and active history. Nonetheless, this approach to support for persons with disabilities needs a great deal of investigation. Forum participants identified the following areas where research is needed.

- Career development. Descriptive, qualitative and survey research on job changes over time.

- Implementation. Descriptive, experimental, evaluation and survey research on methods for developing natural supports and for shifting existing services to include more natural supports.

- Choice and self-determination. Studies that document strategies for increasing, enhancing and evaluating consumer determination in natural supports. Also, studies are needed that identify methodological innovation in the area of choice and self-determination.

- Job development and employer relations. Descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative analyses that present information from the perspectives of service providers, employers and people with disabilities.

- Quality of life. Studies that analyze the effects of natural supports on other areas of life, clarifying practices and workplace characteristics that meet individual preferences.

- Benefit-cost analyses. Investigations that present data on the economic impact of natural supports on businesses, providers, the system and on consumers.

- Company characteristics. Descriptive, survey and qualitative analyses of the companies that participate in natural supports. Studies should include information on the use of

typical company resources (e.g., employee assistance programs, human resource departments, unions).

- Policy analyses. Analyses of the efforts involved in planning systems change; in responding to, and supporting, innovation; and in changing administrative regulations. Included in these studies should be an investigation of the roles played by agencies, support personnel, and people with disabilities.

The research needed in natural supports will require the cooperation of policy makers, service providers, university personnel, and people with disabilities. It seems appropriate to expect "participatory research" wherein people with disabilities help to shape research questions, designs and dissemination.

Implications for Staff Training and Development

Natural supports require social service practitioners to develop new relationships, assume different roles and carry out new functions. Training and staff development are also influenced by changes in organizational culture, the economy, and in our understanding of staff support. Forum participants noted the following points related to staff training and development.

- New relationships. At all levels, training is needed in ways to develop and maintain new relationships with people with disabilities and employers. People with disabilities and personnel from business and industry should participate in the design of training.

- Staff development. Methods for providing support to staff already involved in supported employment must be developed. Current staff should be consulted in the design of training aimed at developing natural supports.

- Environmental/job analysis. Workplace analysis and negotiating skills are needed for managers, job developers and job coaches.

- Job development and employer relations. New approaches to job development that include emphasis on customer focus and long-term relationships with employers. Company personnel and successful developers of natural supports should help design this training. People with disabilities should help develop the strategies that address their interests in choice and career development.

- Consultation and negotiation. Support personnel need assistance in developing consultant and problem solving relationships with employers, co-workers, and consumers.

- Human resource practices. Personnel from the social service system need to understand emerging human resource management practices.

- Values. Formats are needed that enable social service staff, business personnel and people with disabilities to explore and share their values pertaining to inclusion, natural supports and relationships.

- Support strategies. Provider personnel need to learn effective and efficient methods for providing ongoing assistance and training to co-workers.

Training and staff development should be evaluated based on their impact on the success of natural supports. Evaluation should involve the staff receiving training, co-workers and their supervisors, and people with disabilities.

Implications for Policy and Funding

State and federal policy and funding guided the development of supported employment in the last decade. Leadership in the policy arena made it possible for supported employment to become an option for thousands of people with severe disabilities. Forum participants suggested that natural supports would benefit from the same kind of policy leadership and funding flexibility that created supported employment.

The most important issue at the policy level is the fact that people with disabilities should be fully involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of policy. The further development of natural support requires efforts that make this a reality. In addition, participants suggested the following policy activities.

- Assess the impact of natural supports on the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992.

- Investigate and articulate the issues related to Title XIX and natural supports.

- Develop flexible funding mechanisms that encourage the use of natural supports.

- Develop policies that encourage natural supports across disability labels.

- Emphasize choice and leadership on the part of people with disabilities as natural supports are developed.

- Involve the business community in defining policy and resource options.

- Develop policies that encourage continued innovation in how supports are designed and provided.

- Analyze and revise policies that appear to be contradictory in relation to integration and natural supports.

Summary

Policies shift in response to changes in values, outcomes and political realities. Natural supports represents an approach to employment service that holds promise in all of these elements. However, as noted throughout this document, critical pieces of the puzzle are yet to be put in place. Table 4 summarizes the areas that must be addressed if natural supports is to succeed as an approach to employment support that meets the inclusion and career development standards of persons with disabilities.

Table 4. Natural Supports: Summary of Needs

Needs	Specific Issues
Information	• Implementation methods • Outcomes and comparison data • Research results in a variety of areas in user friendly formats
Systems Change	• Focus on the Individual • Specific professional roles • Agency responsiveness • Staff development • Policy responsiveness
Self-Determination	• Access to information • Participation in all levels of planning and implementation • Evaluation roles • Methods for inclusion • Guidelines for professionals

Information. Further development will require practical information on methods for implementation and indications of strategies that have been attempted and proven to be successful. Outcome data are needed so that planners, employers and persons with disabilities can become wise consumers of natural supports options. Research results from a wide range of studies employing a number of methodologies must be made available in formats that are accessible to persons interested in natural supports.

Systems change. Real change occurs when "system" priorities and practices change. The key to this level of change is system-wide commitment to a focus on the individual. If this occurs, it is then important to make both specific professional roles and agency practices responsive to this goal. Staff development activities, at all levels of the system, need to be revised to reflect the shift to natural supports. Policies on planning, funding, and regulating

natural supports must be flexible and consistent with an approach that is specific to the individual and the culture of real workplaces.

Self-determination. Natural supports should be guided by people with disabilities and their employers. The Forum is an example of an attempt at inclusion. Perhaps the real contribution of the Forum is consensus among participants that this is the area that will determine if natural supports is to fulfill its promise.