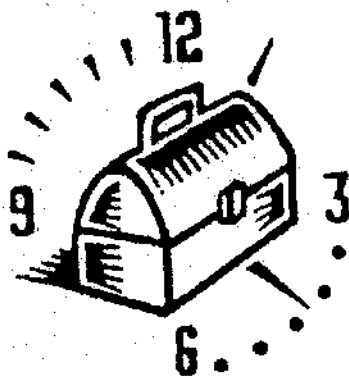




*What Research Says*

# Supported Employment



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There's no doubt that work is an integral part of society. We define ourselves, and others define us, by what we do. Most of us choose occupations

with great care. From the time we are children, we ask, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" People with disabilities, like everyone else, want to work at a job in which they take pride. They want and need challenging work that is rewarding. Just like everyone else, they want and need to make choices about employment and training as they finish school.

For many years, people with disabilities had few options. Adults with disabilities were placed in daycare situations to be supervised. Sometimes this was in institutions. Too many adults have been unnecessarily institutionalized because "experts" believed, and told families, that some people could never be contributing members of society and should be

protected. At the time, it seemed to be a major advance when sheltered workshops came into existence. In sheltered workshops, adults with disabilities are paid piece rate for their work. Workers often make products for a company that has a contract with the shelter. Theoretically, sheltered workshops provide training so that adults with disabilities learn some skill needed to be employable. Well established in many communities, workshops may seem like the only solution for families too tired to buck the system. However, research shows, the work is repetitive. Workers stop learning new skills in workshops after a while and may actually be delayed in their development. This happens because workers aren't continually challenged in their work and associate only with other workers who have disabilities. Another problem is low pay. Worker pay in workshops is usually well under the federal minimum wage, averaging little more than a \$1 an hour.

**The supported employment choice. The key to** rewarding employment for people with disabilities may lie in supported employment. Introduced in the Rehabilitation Act

(Public Law 98-527), supported employment was defined as "paid employment for persons for developmental disabilities for whom competitive employment is unlikely because of their disabilities in a setting in which persons without disabilities are employed. "It is real work for real pay. Here, a regular business hires an adult with a disability. In most cases, this happens with the help of an agency that matches business to people with disabilities. Usually, the workers have some choice in their job placement. (If there is no agency, parents may have to be creative in developing employment possibilities.)

Job coaches. The agency that places workers may also have employees acting as job coaches. These employment specialists train the adult with a disability on the job, supplementing the employer's training responsibility. The job coach also teaches work-related behaviors, such as when to take breaks and how to ask for help, and helps the person work as independently as possible. As the person with a disability becomes more independent, the job coach decreases his or her time, trains the person in new duties,

intervenes for problems, and checks on progress. In time, the new worker will use support from managers, "old-timers" at the work site, and work friends instead of the job coach.

**Dependency costs.** One researcher said that if an adult enters a day activity program at age 21, moves at an average rate to a sheltered workshop, and goes on to a competitive job, the person would not work at a regular job until age 77! The costs of lifelong dependency are great. For example, states pick up a good deal of special service costs for adults with disabilities, at an annual cost per person greater than the average U. S. wage earner's salary. Comparatively speaking, a private, non-profit agency that assigns clients to supported employment jobs does so at much less cost to the public over time. Supported employment also can help adults with disabilities attain self-sufficiency, productivity, friends, and independent living.

**Increased earning power.** Supported employment can mean great individual financial gains as well. Most studies

show that adults working in supported employment can make much more money than they could working in sheltered workshops. Research shows that people employed in supported employment jobs earn, on average, three times as much as sheltered workers. Multiply that difference in earning power over the years of employment: The difference is staggering.

**Desire for regular jobs.** A survey of sheltered workshop workers indicated that workers did hope to leave the workshop for outside work. In another survey, some adults with moderate mental disabilities rated vocational and social skills as most important in their lives, followed by personal, academic, and leisure skills.

**Employers gain.** Governmental wage subsidy programs and tax credits can make supported employment financially attractive to employers. For employers who need convincing, research shows that adults with disabilities usually make good workers. In one study, worker attendance with and without mental retardation did not differ signifi-

cantly. A 1993 study showed that 96% of employers in Oklahoma reported satisfaction with the work of their employees who had mental retardation. Another study showed that supported employment workers reduced turnover rates. One study of 167 people with disabilities, most on their first job, showed that they held those jobs for 19 months on average. By comparison, most employees without disabilities in the same jobs stayed less than a year.

**Americans With Disabilities Act.** Another good reason that employers should consider hiring people with disabilities is the American With Disabilities Act (ADA). Signed into law in 1992, the ADA prohibits discrimination based on employment. If a "qualified individual with a disability" can do the "essential functions" of a job with or without accommodations, then an employer can be charged with discrimination if that employer rejects a potential employee because of disability.

**Typical jobs.** A 1991 national study of 9,327 employees with disabilities showed custodial (32%), clerical (4%),

manufacturing (10%), food service (24%), and other positions (29%). In Virginia, 1,800 supported employment workers revealed that their jobs included food service, custodial, clerical, grounds keeping, laundry, transportation, warehouse/stock clerk, benchwork, and unskilled labor positions. Other positions in which people with disabilities have had success are data entry, mail work, photocopying, animal care, and others.

**Transition from school.** Many parents welcome the good news about supported employment. They want their children to find happiness in their work. Added earnings also eases some worry. However, setting up a successful supported employment situation takes time. Families and people who work with families find that transition from school to employment is usually where this work begins in earnest.

**Employment as curriculum.** Students must be taught good employment skills, experts say, while still in high school. Ideally, the school should:



- Include vocational training in the Individualized Education Plan
- Allow students access to part-time vocation training as part of its curriculum
- Encourage inclusion of students into the school itself and world of work
- Strive for community-based instruction (which means that students work at job training sites)

**Career advising.** Students with disabilities should be encouraged to explore careers, have good self-concepts related to their careers, and re-evaluate choices once they start working.

**Practical matters.** When setting up an effective transition plan, families and those working with families need to look at all parts of the student's life. How is the student going to get back and forth from the job site? What happens when there is job failure? Can the personal care assistant work outside of our house on the job site, too?

**Supplemental Security Income.** Families often ask how supported employment will affect the Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Income their child currently receives. Under regular rules, checks are reduced by other income. However, this differs when the person with a disability has a plan for achieving self support (PASS). A PASS lets the person set aside money to start a business or get training for a job and that does not reduce government benefits. Contact the local U. S. Department of Health and Human Services office for further information.

**Family support.** Parents can be the most effective advocates for their children. Research has proven this. For example, one study found that adults with disabilities employed competitively for as long as five years had tremendous parental support. Things that families can do include:

- Teaching the importance of work by assigning specific jobs around home
- Encouraging their child to learn about jobs
- Teaching good personal appearance and social skills
- Getting their child into training programs, so they can

work part-time before graduation

- Accessing state regulation information about disability and employment from established local organizations

Researchers and other experts say that families have to be assertive to keep their children's employment options truly open. And when a job does not work out, families must not give up. They should continue seeking a good job match and be prepared to make several tries.

**Decision-Making.** Here are the pros and cons of supported employment and supported workshops. Which sounds right for you?

#### *Supported employment: Advantages*

- Financial rewards reflect the "real" world
- Adults with disabilities are more likely to continue developing more skills.
- Supported employment teaches individuals more about responsibility, self-sufficiency, and independence.
- Workers receive ongoing support from job coaches.

- Workers receive intensive, one-on-one training from job coaches.
- Adults can try out jobs to find activities they enjoy.
- There is usually greater job satisfaction since workers will probably feel good about contributing a service leading to increased feelings of self-confidence, work, and pride.
- Inclusion with persons without disabilities can lead to new kinds of friendships.
- Workers are viewed in higher esteem by family and friends.

### *Supported employment: Disadvantages*

- There is possibility of job failure.
- Transportation issues need to be resolved.
- As with other workers, supported employment workers may have conflicts with co-workers, an unsatisfactory boss, and other common job risks.
- Workers may lose their place in the sheltered workshop and go back on the waiting list if the supported employment does not work out.

### *Sheltered workshop: Advantages*

- Transportation is often provided to and from the workshop.
- Parents may feel their child is "safer" in a sheltered workshop.

### *Sheltered workshop: Disadvantages*

- Workers may stop learning new skills.
- There is limited integration with persons who do not have disabilities.
- Workers can't try a variety of jobs to find one they like.
- Job training is not as structured as in supported employment and opportunities for one-on-one training are more limited.
- There is often a waiting list.
- Typically, wages are extremely low.
- Some sheltered workshops often follow a calendar like the school year with early dismissals and time off in the summer.

The following story is an example of one family's experience with supported employment.

*When she left her son's high school after that fateful IEP conference, Jan felt as if her world had been turned upside down. As she drove home, Jan went over the latest information about her son Mark, 16, with severe mental retardation. '*

*Travis Hill, the new special education teacher at Mark's school, had said, "Jan, it's time to think about some of Mark's employment options. If I had been here before now, I would have had him in a part-time job already. It really is time to be teaching him employment skills. There's no better place to learn than on the job. And we also need to be thinking about kind of job he would like." "What kind of job?" Jan repeated, unbelieving. "We've been thinking that Mark could go to work at the workshop."*

*Travis answered that sheltered workshops were an option. But Mark could also work, Travis said, at a regular job with the help of a job coach in "supported employment." At this type of employment, Travis said, many choices are available to people with disabilities, the same choices that people without disabilities have. People with disabilities can have "real" jobs and be paid "real" wages. Travis said he had successfully placed several students in various supported employment jobs when he taught in another state.*

*Jan did not immediately like the idea. In fact, she was anxious about the suggestion that Mark could actually work at a regular job with regular people. She wanted to protect him despite knowing in her heart that protection wouldn't help him in the long run. Jan sat, allowing this new idea to sink in before she started asking questions. "How?" she asked Travis. "Who would hire him? What if he weren't able to do the job? Who would make sure the other employees weren't mean to him? Wouldn't it just be easier to have him placed at the workshop?"*

*Jan began checking things out on her own. The IEP conference gave her information to think about. She and another family members considered Mark's future. Their past imaginations and expectation had not gone beyond the town's sheltered workshop. They also had thought Mark would probably live in a group home with other adults with developmental disabilities.*

*She remembered his early school years, when all the special ed students were in their own building. Then they were moved to a classroom at a school attended by other children. Recently, Mark had been included in a few classes. She thought how she had been worried at first how he would react to the other kids and they to him. "It's been good for him," she thought. "He is becoming more outgoing and enjoys the contacts with kids his own age. " Then Jan and her husband Gary discussed the "unknowns," yet kept their minds open because they wanted Mark's life to be happy. After several discussions, they decided to investigate supported employment on their own.*



*Jan visited the sheltered workshop and found many employees a bit dulled, as they did their job putting together pens. As Jan was leaving the workshop, she met Cindy, a girl she knew from Mark's school. Cindy barely greeted her. She mumbled and walked to her work space. Jan wondered whether the workshop was too hard on Cindy. This lead Jan to an important revelation: Anyone likes a job that challenges them, that allows them to work in a place they like, with people they like.*

*Gary and Jan talked with Travis, Mark's teacher, and Amy, the director of a new agency trying to get supported employment in the community. Amy eased many of the family initial worries. She explained about job coaches and suggested they observe workers at supported employment jobs. Amy also told them that most people with disabilities lose jobs because they lack social skills, not because they can't do the work Amy suggested that the family closely watch Mark's social interactions, encourage appropriate behavior, and tell him when behaviors were not appropriate.*

*Jan next visited job sites of people working through the supported employed agency. For the most part, Jan liked what she saw. The people worked in typical jobs, such as laundries and restaurants, with job coaches, who were invaluable. They not only helped the workers, but made sure communication lines were kept open between the worker and their co-workers. Jan and Gary also talked with other parents about supported employment. Most valued the experience, but painted a less rosy picture than Travis and Any.*

*"We know how important this is. We want it badly. But I wish someone would have warned us about how hard this would be," one mother told Jan. Running through all this advice was one common thread: Nip problems in the bud. Continually search for way to make this work."*

*The family decided to try supported employment while Mark was still in school. Knowing Mark and having talked with him, they asked whether he could work at a local tree nursery. Although they picked the best kind of job for him, their first attempt failed. Mark's supervisor was uncomfort-*

*able with Mark and did Mark's work for him rather than letting Mark do it. Despite efforts on everyone's part, the situation was intolerable. Mark quit. Jan was devastated. She felt better when her teen-aged daughter pointed out that most teens don't stay at their first job long. Why would Mark be any different?*

*Soon, Mark began working for the city parks outdoors doing odd jobs. But he wasn't "growing things" and this made him unhappy. The job coach and boss just could not motivate him. Mark's behavior worsened as his job dissatisfaction increased. He and his family decided to try another job.*

*Mark did find successful employment when he graduated. He worked at a large, family-owned garden store and even learned to take care of sick plants. The store had a low turnover rate, and he made friends with other workers. Mark needed his job coach less and less, and the family began placing a considerable portion of his earnings away for later. Sometimes Jan still worried. But she thought the benefits far outweighed the down sides. A special plus was*

*the support network that Mark was building. His family knew that when they couldnt help, the network could protect Mark and guide him as he struggled to gain independence.*

Information for this booklet came from products developed at the Research and Training Center on Supported Employment at Virginia Commonwealth University and the Beach Center on Families and Disability at the University of Kansas. Other places for timely information on supported employment, include PACER Center, Inc., 4826 Chicago Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55417-1055 (612-827-2966 Voice/TDD) and The Employment Network, 1235 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1235.

About the Beach Center. We connect our research, training, and dissemination activities to the theme of family empowerment. Each of our research projects supports and strengthens the motivation, resources, and skills that families who have children with special needs already have and helps communities respond better to these families. Our research is both scientifically rigorous and sensitive to families. We involve the users of our research (families, individuals with disabilities, service providers, researchers, trainers, and policy makers) in all research phases.



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