

A Different Kind of Workshop

by Henry Redkey

On the long road of vocational rehabilitation traveled since the early 1920's, we have continually stressed the need to change the handicapped individual. We have sought to shape him to fit a place in the competitive world of work. Yet we have done little to adapt industry to the needs of the handicapped.

Early on we relied on training. Then as we became more sophisticated, we tested, we diagnosed, we adjusted, we evaluated—always with an eye to placement in the existing industry structure. Later, there was an increased emphasis on the professional training of counselors and other personnel. Again, the goal of such persons was to change handicapped individuals into competitive employment situations.

All of this worked remarkably well with the limited population to which it was originally applied: amputees, hemiplegics, some paraplegics, the deaf, and the blind. As programs evolved, however, more disability groups attempted to gain access to rehabilitation services. Rehabilitation counselors were reticent to recommend rehabilitation as feasible for persons with more severe disabilities. The hitch seemed to be that single criterion for success which faced the counselor: placement in competitive employment.

During the gestation period of rehabilitation services one other option existed for disabled persons—the sheltered workshop. Workshops had in fact antedated vocational rehabilitation by many years. The work done in them by handicapped people may not have been too significant, the working conditions were probably bad, and the motivation for establishing them may have been at least partly to get the handicapped off the street and out of sight. Nevertheless they persisted, eventually finding expansion and rehabilitation emphasis in salvage operations typified by Goodwill programs.

Vocational rehabilitation people, preoccupied with the criterion of competitive placement, originally looked on these workshops as dead-ends not worthy of being called rehabilitation. However, one day they took another look and realized that, since these places did provide a work environment, they might be used as a work laboratory in the rehabilitation process. The converts' zeal soon overwhelmed the workshops.

Simple institutions trying to provide work soon found themselves entitled to large federal funding. The funding was the only kind of vocational rehabilitation people in Washington knew about—namely, helping

services. There was money for training, counseling, evaluation, adjustment, psychological and placement services. Workshops were therefore slowly converted into rehabilitation centers to be used as a stepping stone to placement in industry.

During that transition and the years that followed, vocational rehabilitation programs did not invest heavily in those aspects of a workshop that directly related to a good work experience. Such things as work flow, that Isadore Salkind has so often advocated, received very little attention. Plant layout, quality control, and the relation of capital investment to wages were like a foreign language to the rehabilitation people.

None would disagree with the importance of mainstreaming the handicapped into competitive employment. Yet serious questions remain unanswered concerning the persons who simply cannot "succeed" in competitive employment. What obligation does society have to those left behind?

The history of rehabilitation in the United States has been one of steady expansion of eligibility for services. We must now ask whether our ability to place members of these groups in competitive employment has kept pace as the eligibility for rehabilitation has broadened. Obviously it has not.

There will always be examples of people in any of these groups succeeding in the industrial world, and we should make the most of it and constantly try to pry the door open wider for them; but as we well know, not all individuals in any of these groups are exceptional in the sense of their ability to put themselves forward or to adjust in a difficult environment. What about those who cannot?

It seems evident enough that it is easier for industry to adjust to an individual handicapped person if his disability is easily understood by the employer and fellow employers. It is a quite different matter when we are dealing with groups of the disabled, some of whose disabilities are not understood by the average person or seem repulsive to him. How far can industry be persuaded, or forced, to employ large numbers of these disabled people? Quite a lot more, we hope, but there are realistic limits.

As the eligibility for rehabilitation has expanded, we finally have come face to face with the fact that a large group has been left behind, whose needs are now described as independent living. The term is variously conceived, but at least in some cases has no vocational component. Others with very severe

handicaps and needing extensive help in the form of attendants and helping devices, will certainly at some point claim a right to work if—as seems likely—we continue as a nation to hold up the work ethic as a measure of goodness and self-respect. So it would appear that the number of severely disabled we will be called upon to place in industry is steadily increasing. Evidence that there is a corresponding increase in willingness to accept them in industry is not yet apparent.

Over the years there have been a variety of efforts to either force, cajole or bribe industry into hiring the handicapped. One of the oldest and most successful was and probably is the on-the-job training method used by rehabilitation counselors. An employer is paid to accept and train the client. At the end of the training period, the employer has become adjusted to the handicap and appreciates the client's worth and hires him. This is good but it works on an individual, not on a mass, basis.

Most recently in Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, government said, "You must not discriminate against the handicapped." That is a worthy goal but there are many elements that make up a person's employability and many different aspects of a job situation. If industry does not really want to employ the handicapped, then means may be found to justify why an applicant does not fit. The European experience with quotas suggests such a result.

Marc Gold and other have shown that mentally retarded persons can be exceptionally productive when the work is properly selected and organized. That is an important advance in our knowledge. There remains, however, the question of whether competitive industry can be persuaded to do all the selection and organization of the work necessary to give employment to large numbers of the retarded.

During World War II many employers, who steadfastly insisted the handicapped could not perform their work, suddenly found themselves in a great manpower shortage. Just as suddenly they found that one-armed men could learn welding in a few weeks and help build ships. It would seem in normal times there ought to be more open doors for handicapped, but they have not opened wide. There must be a better way than to have a war to put the severely handicapped to work.

A number of European countries have experimented with quotas, whereby each employer is required to hire a certain percentage of handicapped individuals. It is said to be reasonably successful in Britain, but on the continent employment people insist it does not work and that employers find many ways to circumvent the law. In Germany it was reported

that employers were more likely to pay the fine than hire the handicapped.

In our efforts to mainstream the handicapped into regular employment, we can learn from Sweden's experience. Like the United States, that country has for 50 years or more sternly believed that the handicapped could all be placed in industry. It set up sheltered workshops on a temporary basis while many ingenious plans were explored for getting the handicapped into industry jobs. Some plans called for a subsidy of up to 40% of the wages paid. They did not work. Finally, the National Labor Board concluded that sheltered workshops could not be eliminated by placing all handicapped people in industry. The alternative was to accept the fact that workshops might serve a permanent function for some persons. If this is to be our solution we should carefully consider what kind of workshops we should have and how they relate to our rehabilitation efforts.

This does not mean that sheltered workshops should be the sole means of employing the handicapped. Strong efforts must continue to place the handicapped in competitive employment. But again, we must deal with realistic limits. In that regard we should recognize two things.

First, industry will have great difficulty in finding ways to employ many of the severely handicapped, even though each is a precious and valuable human being. Employers are not anti-human, but they operate in a hard world of economics and employee relations which we should be able to recognize. Second, the severely handicapped will want the benefits of work, but the need for a special kind of place to work increases proportionately to the severity of the handicap. Production may be marginal in many cases. Subsidy may be essential. In Sweden and Holland it is freely admitted that it costs (in 1975 dollars) from \$5,000 to \$8,000 per year to keep a handicapped person employed in their excellent workshops. They quickly add that it takes about \$5,000 to maintain such people on welfare but that the difference is a good investment in people whom they regard as part of the work force.

If there is indeed a need to build and operate some workshops, somewhat in the European style, what kind of things must be considered?

The first and most obvious thing is that the establishing, equipping, and managing of such shops is not a job for rehabilitation workers, social workers, or psychologists. We have been found wanting for too long. Industry's management professionals, backed by industrial engineers and personnel specialists, will be needed. These specialists must also be given a special kind of sensitivity to handicaps and the people

who have them so they can focus on how each person can best function, not how we can remodel him.

A second consideration is that such employment will cost money and, as they have found in The Netherlands, it requires subsidy. In this country the subsidy will almost certainly have to come from federal sources and underscore this—it must be dependable from year to year, not on a grant basis, here today and perhaps gone tomorrow. As explained below, most of this subsidy will go into wages.

A third consideration is how to pay competitive wages. Organized labor and others have long been critical of low wages paid in workshops. The criticism arises from an ignorance of the difference between profit-making competitive industry, which pays only for what makes money for it, and the very different situation of the sheltered workshop. The workshop too often tries to change the individual as well as employ him. The poor productivity that results means lower wages. Undercapitalization of the work process prevents significant financial gains even when the individual becomes well adapted.

The workshop has thus projected an image of paying low wages which labor people do not understand. Efforts have been made to somehow coerce the workshops into paying regular wages, but they have been unsuccessful. As an alternative, a wage subsidy could be used to accomplish this. In a well capitalized and well managed special workshop, it would probably be less than might be expected, because of increased productivity under greatly improved working conditions.

To this writer it seems that the only way to achieve these results is to use the European model, where relations between workshops and organized labor are excellent. But we should always bear in mind that we are discussing what have been termed extended employment shops. They are not shops for training, adjustment, evaluation or counseling, but shops for extended employment.

A fourth consideration is that adequate capital and expertise must be available to provide excellent modern, efficient equipment.

A fifth consideration is that such shops must be managed and operated as nearly like a competitive business as possible, making only such concessions to the handicapped worker as are absolutely necessary, including perhaps transportation and a

somewhat better-than-average health unit to handle emergencies. All this would be on the understanding that a great many rehabilitation services would be available elsewhere and that these shops would furnish only work.

A sixth consideration should be that, while for many workers this would be their permanent place of employment, the door must always be kept open for movement out when the worker wishes to do so.

A seventh and final consideration must be that not every handicapped person can be successfully employed even in this set-up. There must be a cut-off productivity point below which the person cannot be retained. Wage subsidy to prevailing level is not possible unless this is done.

A system of long-term workshops, expertly managed and well financed, could provide employment for a large portion of those who will not find competitive employment. It would also reduce the inevitable residue for whom employment may be impossible. These ideas need to be the basis for experimentation in an American setting, before trying to make anything mandatory.

Even in the experimentation stage, though, certain principles must be retained.

1. Such extended employment should be held to strict compliance with existing law relative to hiring and employment of the handicapped.

2. The highest safety standards should be observed. One handicap is enough.

3. The law should provide for prevailing wages through subsidy, and for collective bargaining similar to that in private industry.

4. There should be no relaxation of the requirements in private industry because of the existence of these shops.

In summary, we need some workshops that function as employers, not rehabilitators. They should meet industry standards of capitalization, equipment, and wage levels. Such shops are no panacea, but they could supply a form of intermediate employment not now available to the severely handicapped. There are models in existence that could be adapted to American needs.

Henry Redkey was for many years the Chief of Rehabilitation Facilities for HEW. In 1975, he completed a study on the rehabilitation facilities of five European countries. He now lives in the State of Washington.