

# RRTC

*"Improving Supported Employment Outcomes for Individuals with the Most Severe Disabilities"*

**REHABILITATION RESEARCH AND TRAINING CENTER AT VIRGINIA**  
**COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY**

## **Natural Supports and the Job Coach: An Unnecessary Dichotomy**

The movement to emphasize the use of community and workplace supports has become a topic of interest to individuals with disabilities and local programs providing supported employment services. The notion underlying the "natural supports" approach reflects an increased recognition of the ability of employers to accept and accommodate a diverse array of employees; the potential role of family members in locating jobs; and the willingness and ability of coworkers to provide training, assistance, and support. Although credible evidence documenting the effectiveness of the natural supports approach is lacking, few can argue with the overall intent of these efforts.

Unfortunately, the natural supports model has been presented as the sole alternative to the "traditional" job coach model, which is viewed by some as ineffective or even detrimental to individuals with disabilities. However, the job coach model is not the "problem" with supported employment. Minimizing the major impact of employment specialists who work closely at the job site with individuals with disabilities is unjustified and unproductive. Instead, we should ask whether employment specialists are using all available resources and strategies to meet the needs of workers and companies.

In order to find out the value of an employment specialist, ask the people participating in supported employment what they want from their job coaches. This is exactly what Dr. Wendy Parent at our Center did through a series of intense, face-to-face interviews with supported employment participants. What did she find out? Those people interviewed were not saying that they want their job coach to stay away from the workplace. On the contrary, they want their job coaches to be there when they need them. Consumers desire and demand the support of a skilled employment specialist.

In addition, the vast majority of employers view the job coach as a positive presence within the work place, as opposed to an intrusive or disruptive influence. The clear message from them is that they want the job coach to be immediately accessible and responsive to their needs (Kregel & Tomiyasu, 1994; Kregel & Unger, 1993; Petty, 1994). Denying employers the opportunity to hire individuals because they need more assistance and support than employers can provide, does a disservice to the individuals

and the employers.

It makes little sense to continually discuss the pros and cons of job coaches versus support facilitators. The "job coach" model has enabled more than 100,000 individuals to gain and retain competitive employment. Efforts are only now underway to fully determine the effectiveness of natural support approaches. Yet, neither approach has been particularly effective in allowing individuals with significant cognitive disabilities to participate in competitive employment, and neither has fully encouraged consumers to choose their own jobs and plan their own careers. Framing the argument in an "either/or" manner trivializes our real problems and hides the fact that supported employment needs to move beyond all current models. We must identify new strategies that empower consumers and enable all individuals with significant disabilities to benefit from employment.

The problems facing supported employment are challenging and very real. Our nation's system of segregated day programs remains firmly entrenched. Millions of individuals continue to be denied access to high quality employment programs that would enable them to take charge over their careers. The ADA continues to be assailed as an "unfunded federal mandate" which places burdensome constraints on well-meaning businesses. Finding solutions to these challenges will require a renewal of the spirit of innovation and risk-taking which has been a defining characteristic of supported employment since its inception.

While the effectiveness of natural supports has not been proven, some of its key ideas and strategies (e.g., maximizing the use of employer and community supports) are crucial components of any supported employment model. For example, this newsletter describes an approach which incorporates many natural support strategies into an innovative supported employment model that (1) empowers consumers to direct their own careers, (2) reaffirms and revitalizes the important role of the employment specialist, and (3) guarantees that individuals with significant disabilities will not be excluded from supported employment programs.

Support strategies must be developed that enable people with disabilities to direct their own careers and obtain jobs of their choice. To do that, the best components of the job coach model **and** natural support strategies must be combined, as well as assistive technology, person-centered planning, compensatory strategies, personal assistant services, and many other strategies and approaches. The purpose of this newsletter is to specifically address how this can be accomplished.

•••Dr. John Kregel

## Questions and Answers on Natural Supports

1. HAVE NATURAL SUPPORTS CHANGED THE CONCEPT OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT?

**NO**

**The basic premises on which supported employment was established have not changed**, however it has expanded to include new service technologies. People with disabilities want to work in real jobs, and supported employment offers the means for

achieving this goal. No support strategy or methodology, regardless of how good it sounds, should compromise the values on which this vocational model was based. Individuals have the right to be employed by community businesses where they earn comparable wages, work side-by-side with their coworkers, and experience all of the same benefits as other employees of the company. Most importantly, they must be able to choose the characteristics of their jobs, as well as the community workplace Supports that will assist them in maintaining employment.

## 2. CAN USING COMMUNITY AND WORKPLACE SUPPORTS FACILITATE CONSUMER CHOICE?

### YES

The evolution of supported employment into a consumer-driven approach with opportunities for choice from an endless selection of support options is the next logical step to improve an established and successful service modality. Use of community and workplace supports puts consumers in the "driver's seat" allowing them to direct their careers and choose the type and amount of assistance they want to receive.

## 3. CAN NATURAL SUPPORTS ELIMINATE THE NEED FOR JOB COACHES?

### NO

As supported employment evolves to incorporate consumer choice initiatives and a variety of new support technologies, the job coaches' role becomes even more critical. It is evident that community and workplace supports do not automatically meet the support needs of individuals with severe disabilities. The job coach is the one constant person who possesses the skills to identify and develop support resources, assist with accessing services, evaluate the effectiveness, and arrange alternative provisions as need arises. Consumers should choose who will assist them, how assistance will be provided, and be able to change their minds, while maintaining a "circle of support" from job coaches who are available to orchestrate or provide the desired supports.

## 4. WILL CONSUMERS' NEEDS FOR COMMUNITY AND WORKPLACE SUPPORTS DIFFER?

### YES

Each consumer needs different types of assistance, as well as varying levels of support at different times in the employment process. For example, an individual with extensive job site training needs may choose to have: a coworker teach one task; the job coach teach another; the parents arrange transportation; the rehabilitation counselor purchase uniforms; a friend assist with managing her paycheck; a cafeteria worker support her during lunch breaks; the supervisor monitor work performance, and a social security consultant assist with writing a PASS plan. The management of these many support resources is a function which falls naturally within the parameters of a job coach's roles.

5. CAN'T CONSUMERS ACCESS COMMUNITY AND WORKPLACE SUPPORTS ON THEIR OWN?

**NO**

Taking advantage of the support resources that are available in the workplace does not occur automatically for persons with severe disabilities. Just because a support exists does not mean that a consumer will access or benefit from its use. It is not uncommon for an individual to be unaware of potential supports that are available, how to choose among the alternatives, or how to access a desired support. A critical factor in the use of a variety of options is the role of the job coach who assists the consumer in identifying, choosing, and accessing needed supports at whatever level of assistance he or she prefers.

## Examples of Support Option Resources

The first step in utilizing an array of support options is finding out what type of assistance is potentially available in the community and different employment settings. This can only be accomplished by becoming familiar with the local community and the many support resources available to and used by individuals with and without disabilities. Similar to the community job market analysis typically conducted by most supported employment programs, identifying community and workplace support options requires that personal contact be made with various agencies, organizations, associations, and businesses.

Ideas of organizations or agencies to investigate can be identified from a variety of sources. Those found to be the most productive include personal connections through friends or acquaintances, the telephone book, the consumer and his or her friends, the newspaper, and other colleagues. Five general types of support option categories have been identified. These include: 1) employer supports, 2) transportation supports, 3) community supports, 4) personal and independent living supports, and 5) recreation and social integration supports. Several examples of different kinds of support options identified within each of these categories are listed in the following table.

### EXAMPLES OF SUPPORT OPTION RESOURCES

#### EMPLOYER SUPPORTS:

Coworker Mentor

Scheduling Flexibility

Company Videotape Training

Supervisor Prompting or Monitoring

Coworker Training or Monitoring

Job Duty Checklist Provided by Employer

Company Sponsored Computer Accommodation Program

Supervisor and Coworker Advocacy

Employee Assistance Program

Employer Counseling

#### TRANSPORTATION SUPPORTS:

Taxi

Riding a Bicycle

Riding with a Coworker

Driven by Parents

Walking

Bus/Public Transportation

#### COMMUNITY SUPPORTS:

Cooperative Extension Service (Financial Management)

YWCA Safety Prevention Courses

Independent Living Center

Social Security Work Incentive Specialist/Consultant

College Students as Peer Mentors/Tutors

Auto Club Driving School

State Assistive Technology Systems

Virginia Employment Commission

Planned Parenthood Courses

Community Sponsored Child Care Course

Red Cross Safety Courses

Neighbors

**PERSONAL AND INDEPENDENT LIVING  
SUPPORTS:**

Counseling (e.g. private counselor)

Housemates

Purchased Digital Watch, Alarm Clock, etc.

Community Residential Workers

Advocate for Assisting with Housing

Purchased Items for Security (e.g. keys, flashlight,  
reflective  
vest)

**RECREATION AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION  
SUPPORTS:**

Jaycees

Volunteer at the Local Rescue Squad

YMCA

Company Sponsored Activities (e.g. bowling)

Neighborhood Community Association

Linking up with a Friend (e.g., skating, lunch, etc.)

After Work Social Activities with Coworkers

Parks and Recreation Programs

**Supported employment** has assisted thousands of individuals with severe disabilities to become successfully employed at competitive jobs in the community. The evolution of the model has resulted in new and innovative support technologies that maximize the use of the employer, coworker, community, and family supports to enable an individual to obtain, learn, and maintain a job of his or her own choosing.

A critical factor in the use of a variety of supports is the role of the job coach who helps the consumer with identifying, choosing, and accessing needed supports at whatever level of assistance he or she prefers. A systematic process for utilizing community and workplace supports in supported employment includes the following components:

- 1 • determine individual needs and preferences;**
- 2 • brainstorm potential options;**
- 3 • assess job and community supports;**
- 4 • identify**
- 5 • develop strategies for accessing supports;**
- 6 • evaluate support effectiveness; and**
- 7 • arrange provisions for on-going monitoring.**

### **1 • DETERMINE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AID PREFERENCES**

It is important to identify the types of assistance that a consumer needs or would like to receive in order to gain and maintain employment. These can be related to finding a job, learning how to do the job, maintaining work performance, developing social relationships, or other work and non-work related issues both on and off the job site. Strategies for accomplishing this goal can include the following:

- meet with the consumer and if possible his/her family;
- make multiple visits as well as phone contacts;
- complete a community assessment by taking the consumer on a "tour" of his/her neighborhood; and
- complete situational assessments with the consumer at multiple real job sites.

### **2 • BRAINSTORM POTENTIAL OPTIONS**

For every support need that is identified, a variety of support resources that may be available should be discussed. For example, an individual who wants training in money management could be provided with the following options: a business school student as a tutor, a volunteer from the Cooperative Extension Service, a course at a community college, or a friend to lend a hand. It is important at this time to think about every possible choice no matter how remote or unlikely the support resource may seem. Decisions based upon what is actually available and what the individual would like to use are made at a later date from the extensive list of options identified during this brainstorming period.

### **3 • ACCESS JOB AID COMMUNITY SUPPORTS**

All of the generated ideas should be discussed with the consumer including an explanation of what utilizing a support of this nature would entail. The availability of the support option, the pros and cons of each, and the level of interest expressed by the individual can be

explored at this time. Assessing these factors can provide direction for job development. For example, one position offers orientation training; another provides coworker mentoring; a third job informally supports employees on an individualized basis; while the final option expects employees to fend for themselves with minimal assistance. The varying levels of support offered by these employment settings combined with other characteristics of the job, such as hours, wages, coworkers, and location will influence an individual's decision about where he or she would prefer to work.

#### **4^ IDENTIFY INDIVIDUAL CHOICES**

Individuals may have difficulty selecting the supports that they would like to use without sufficient information presented to them in a manner which they can understand. Some individuals may not know what the different options are, others may not know their preferences, and others may lack the skills to make a choice among the alternatives. The job coach can help by providing concrete information through hands-on experience.