

Blueprint for Change: Employment Opportunities for All

JAY NOLAN COMMUNITY SERVICES

Introduction

At Jay Nolan Community Services, we have made a commitment to transform our organization to create more opportunities for employment for all the people we serve. We are particularly interested in increasing employment options for people who are often excluded from or underserved in employment programs-- including those living with autism and other challenging developmental disabilities. We utilized the resources of a grant from Autism Speaks to “jump start” this process of transformation in our agency.

The grant was done under the direction of Rebecca Burkhardt, Director of Day Services and Supported Employment and Jeffrey L. Strully, Executive Director. Vivian DiBlasio is the program manager for supported employment and ACE. The principal investigator for the grant was Vickie Vining, independent consultant. (*See contact information at the end of this document.*)

The following document is an overview of key elements of change that we have identified as we progress on this journey. We offer this “Blueprint for Change” as a description of the questions we addressed, the things we learned along the way, the challenges we faced, and some suggested issues for organizations to consider who also want to move in this direction.

We don’t profess to be the “experts” here. We found as many new questions as we did answers and we know we have a lot more work to do to get to where we want to be. But we believe that many things once thought *impossible* are achievable if an organization

- is guided by strong values and intentions,
- seeks help from others farther along in the journey, and
- commits to learning from everything you do.

We hope that what we offer here will help other organizations in some small way to map out their own journeys toward a future where all people—regardless of their disabilities—will have the opportunity to earn meaningful income through jobs or owning their own small businesses.

Key Change Element: Defining and Working Toward Your Values and Beliefs

To go forward with our intention of employment opportunities for all, we had to ask ourselves--- Why isn’t it happening now? Why aren’t people with challenging support needs working? We know that if helping people with significant disabilities to earn income was easy and obvious, then it would already be standard practice and readily available. But it’s not.



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We learned from our work with supported living and personalized family supports that change takes a **strong set of values and a positive vision for the future** driving your organization's efforts. You will hit road blocks and you will get discouraged along the way. We have! What keeps us going is our commitment to our beliefs and our vision for the future for people with autism and other disabilities. These beliefs and values won't let us give up.

Your intentions, values and beliefs also determine **HOW** you provide your services and supports. You need to have a clear idea of what you're trying to accomplish in order to create your blueprint for change. You can't draw a map until you know where you're headed.

What We Believe and Hope for the Future

Here are some of the values and beliefs that have laid the foundation for our journey toward a future where there are employment opportunities for all:

- We believe that employment is what adults do. Everyone has a responsibility to take responsibility for themselves to the greatest extent possible.
- We believe that people with autism and other disabilities should have the opportunity for the same life experiences as people without disabilities.
 - A person shouldn't be forced down a completely different path in life just because he/she needs more support or different kinds of assistance than other people in society.
 - Employment is not a "program." It's a way of life and needs to be structured as much as possible as other people without disabilities experience it.
 - Having the same employment opportunities also means working at the prevailing wage for the type of work being done (no sub-minimum wages.)
- Along with the above belief is the companion one that says segregating people with disabilities away from the rest of society is not right. It limits both people with disabilities' opportunities to flourish and society's opportunity to embrace a wide diversity of humankind.
- We believe that employment is important for people with disabilities:
 - It changes how society views a person (competent and contributing vs incompetent and dependent.)
 - It is a path out of poverty.
 - It provides contacts and resources for other aspects of a person's life.
 - It expands the social network and social capital of individuals.
 - It provides status, dignity, and self-worth.
 - It is one of the most common denominators for people in the community. (When we meet someone we often ask, "What do you do?")
- We believe that all people can work *with the right planning and support*. In our experience with supported living, we found that having significant disabilities does not prevent people from living in their own homes. Likewise, having intense support needs should not exclude someone from meaningful employment. Many times it is the lack of knowledge and skills in the support system that denies the opportunity to work to people with more complicated support needs.
- We believe that the community will support employment for people with disabilities given the right approach. We can't go out presenting what we're doing as *charity*. We take a business approach and make sure we are finding ways for people with disabilities to be a valuable and needed resource to the business community.
- We believe that an organization has to have a true and declared commitment to employment for all. It must be developed as a fully supported priority within the organization.

- Our approach to employment endeavors needs to flow out of and be consistent with the values and beliefs that we hold. Everything we do needs to be tested and evaluated against our values and beliefs.
- We believe that an important factor in successfully pursuing employment opportunities is to address the fears and concerns of the individuals we support, their families, support staff, funders and the community about people with disabilities working. We must assist people to create plans and supports that identify and address the fears and concerns that hold people back from seeking employment.
- We believe that employment support for an individual should be seen in the context of the whole person and his/her circle of support just like our other services—supported living and personalized family supports.
- We believe that in order to move forward to new and better things we need to be willing to let go of old ways of doing things and take on new roles and new approaches. We need to be fearless and bold in our aspirations and grounded and focused in our support for those aspirations.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- While our organization has done extensive work to define and manifest our values, it is often hard to make sure that the same values show up consistently in the day to day operations of every aspect of our organization. Current budget difficulties in the service system rob us of needed staff training and time to reflect with direct support staff on the values that drive us as an organization.
- Some of our stakeholders do not always share the same values as our organization. Families may value maintaining the status quo over helping someone pursue the more complicated path of employment. Some of our funders may value segregated day programs or sheltered workshops over individualized employment supports because the group programs are perceived to be less expensive or easier to case manage-- even though people earn little or no money in them and stay dependent on them forever for the most part.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- What do we really believe about people with disabilities working and earning a living? What about people with very challenging disabilities?
- How widely held are these values in our organization?
- What do the other stakeholders involved in our process believe about people with significant disabilities earning a living? How far apart are our values from theirs?
- Are we willing as an organization to struggle with the sometimes messy process of working through conflicts in values?
- Have we created clear statements about our intentions and beliefs for creating more employment opportunities? Are they shared throughout the agency? If not, how will we define what we intend to do in this area and work to make it happen?
- Have we involved all stakeholders (especially the people we support) in the process of defining and acting on our beliefs?
- How will we use our values to guide our work? How will we come back to them to see if we are on course in our journey?

Key Change Element: Establishing Your Agency's Approach to Employment

What we learned:

In order to increase opportunities for employment for people with significant disabilities, we found that we had to examine and expand our approaches to employment support. We have been doing traditional supported employment successfully for a number of years. However, we needed some new approaches and structures in order to expand our capacity to be creative and innovative enough to offer employment opportunities to a wider range of people's support needs.

Here are some of the things we learned in this part of the journey:

- We found that we had to look at our whole day services and employment departments rather than just adding on some new components to it. We had a consultant, Vickie Vining, who has assisted us to plan and implement the changes that we feel will lead to more employment opportunities to a greater range of individuals.
- An important aspect of our services is of course job development. We had to examine our process for this critical element in employment support.
- Traditional job development works for some people but not everyone. People with more challenging support needs often find it difficult to compete with all the other people filling out job applications and going on interviews.
- We had to expand our repertoire of approaches to include some ways of supporting people that were non-traditional--more creative, less driven by the labor market, less competitive/comparative, and more personalized to the individual.
- Customized employment is an approach that offers a way to tailor the employment development process to the individual. We sought out trainings and consultation in order for us to learn the techniques of customized employment. Since we already did customized support planning for individuals living in their own homes, customized employment was a good match with our organization's values and philosophy.
- Customized employment gave us some tools that assist us to work with the individual and their circle of support to *create* work opportunities rather than just looking for existing job openings.
- In looking at how the general public approaches earning income, we could see that not everybody chooses to work for an employer. Some people do better having their own businesses where they can create an employment opportunity that matches their own set of skills, interests and ideal working conditions. We saw that we need to continue to expand our capacity to help people to start and operate their own small businesses (microenterprises.)
- We received training and advice from a number of people including Cary Griffin and Dave Hammis, Michael Callahan and Sherry Beamer. They helped us to learn a great deal about customized employment, microenterprise development, systematic instruction, and benefits management.
- As a part of our process we had to look at our current day program which had a small employment component. Our day program was designed for groups of two or three people to plan and carry out activities in the community together. We could sometimes assist someone to find employment within this structure, but it was difficult given the group staffing ratio. We had to do some serious "soul searching" about the effectiveness of this approach in light of our commitment to *real* employment for people. We decided employment within a group ratio program did not fit our values and commitment to meaningful, personalized employment. We set about to restructure our day and employment departments. (See next section.)

- An important part of our process was developing a vision and a strategic plan for employment. We worked with stakeholders and staff to chart a course for our organization toward our goal. We developed action plans with steps to take along the way. The plan has been shifted and revised as we implement it, but it was helpful to set out a path for making these changes.
- A part of the strategic plan was to review and revise policies and procedures to support employment more fully. We had to assess whether the ways we were operating were helping or hindering our efforts to offer employment opportunities to a wider population of people.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- We have some difficulty at times having the resources to train and support a sufficient number of our staff to understand and implement customized employment and microenterprise development. We have had the usual staff changes that all programs experience, making it difficult to keep a consistent set of staff trained in these techniques. Our funding sources have been experiencing severe budget shortages which have resulted in funding reductions and limitations. Our grant offered some training resources, but we struggle with finding enough time and money to get the depth and breadth of training we need to be truly proficient in these techniques.
- The funding system was supportive of some new efforts we initiated to get people with significant support needs employed, however budget shortages have led some placement agencies to try to utilize less expensive group day services even though they do not lead to employment.
- Even though we had a strategic plan guiding us, we have had to constantly make adjustments as key staff left or were not well suited to the new tasks that were needed from them. We were not surprised by this, but things never run as smoothly as you'd like them to.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- Which of our day or employment services are doing well in working toward our goals of increased employment opportunities for all people we serve? Which ones are not really producing results in this area?
- Which of our job development approaches are we finding successful? Which are not?
- Are we stuck using one or two methods of employment development? Do we need some new and creative approaches?
- Which of the new ideas in employment supports fit what we're trying to do?
- How much do we know about them? How can we learn more?
- How can we come up to speed in these innovative techniques?
- How can we maintain expertise and quality in using these approaches?
- How can we make sure we don't revert back to old traditional job development over time?
- Who can help us figure this out and move forward to develop new tools for our toolbox?
- How will we create a strategic plan to use as a roadmap for our journey? How will we stay on track with our plan? How will we adapt and adjust our plan as things change?

Key Change Element: Developing an Organizational Structure to Support Employment

What we learned:

One key element for our transformation process was to look at how our services were structured and funded. We determined that effective job development and support can only be done *one person at a time*.

In order to work toward increased employment opportunities for people with more challenging support needs, we had to revise how our programs were structured. We had been trying to do employment for people with more significant disabilities in our group ratio program. That was not working well.

In order to honor our value of supporting people as individuals, we decided that we would no longer accept people into our group programs. We are phasing out the program by attrition and transfer of people to individualized services, but no one was terminated from group services. We did not want to upend the lives of the 100 or so people served by our group programs.

We continue our group services as a community inclusion service. In the program, people go in groups of two or three into the community to volunteer, attend educational classes, exercise, use community resources like libraries or community centers, take care of personal business like banking, and other activities that are consistent with their age, interests, and needs.

Employment support is now only provided by our agency through either of the two individualized services that we operate. We use Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) funding for traditional individual supported employment. We use regional center funding (Medicaid and state general fund) for a personalized one-to-one service we call ACE (Access to Community Employment) for people who are turned down by DOR or who wish to augment employment within a full day of support. When people served by ACE are not working, they participate in activities that expand their skills, interests, or community connections. We worked with our funder to restructure these services to fit our goals and vision for employment opportunities for all.

In ACE we have been training our staff to understand and use customized employment approaches including microenterprise development. This service offers people with very intense support needs an individualized approach to employment development.

Another part of the restructuring of our services was to assure that we had the right staff in the right positions. Just like we match people with disabilities to the right employment situations, we also had to assure that our staff were well matched to the tasks and approaches that were needed. We need to continue this process of finding strengths and talents in our staff and matching them to the people we support. Example: If a person is interested in a job in the music industry, we would look for a support person who also has an interest and connections in the music industry.

We have also been working to revise our job descriptions to make sure we are clear in our expectations for staff performance related to employment development. We need to assure that staff job performance is tied to the outcomes that we want to see in people's lives.

We also have a commitment to including the people we support and their families in our process of transformation. We set up an advisory and support group for people in our employment services. We

have kept them informed of what we're doing with the services and talked with them about what is important to them. We have tried to improve our lines of communication within our services (with the people we support, their families, support staff, other departments in our agency, and our funders.)

A part of our restructuring is also looking at trying to allocate resources like training and supervision toward the outcomes we want to see for employment. When we have some training money available, we look at where we need to strengthen our support for employment development.

We also realize that we can't do this alone. Our efforts are strengthened by creating and maintaining partnerships in all aspects of our service. These include stronger partnerships within our organization, with our funders, with other service providers, and most importantly with the people we serve and their circles of support. We also seek out assistance, ideas, and shared resources with other individuals and organizations that are on the same path to employment opportunities for all. We have worked with a consortium of providers offering microenterprise development. We've also worked with a group of providers to revitalize a Southern California chapter of APSE.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- As we said, it has been a challenge in these difficult budget times to find the extra resources we need to transform our supports. The grant offered some consultation and training resources, but we continue to seek additional funding for more training and for more job developers trained in customized employment and microenterprise development.
- The system does not always hold employment as a high priority for people with complex support needs. They are sometimes reluctant to allocate the additional resources that are needed to make this happen.
- The crisis in California's budget for developmental disabilities services has sapped a lot of our energy and focus. We have had to work endlessly just to maintain what we have now. We continue our commitment to change though regardless of what is happening in the system.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- What parts of our services and organizational structure need to change in order to fully support employment opportunities for all?
- How are we involving all stakeholders in our planning for change?
- What partnerships can we strengthen or create to help us do this?
- Do we need to revise job descriptions, job assignments, and other parts of our personnel system to reflect our commitment to employment?
- What process will we use for planning and implementing the needed changes?
- How will we involve the people we support and their families in the process of change?

Key Change Element: Utilizing a Variety of Funding Streams and Resources

What we learned:

With the idea that employment is not a "program" but a part of life, we as an organization had to learn to utilize funding and support from many sources rather than just getting a program vendored and a rate established. This new way of thinking about financial resources added some complexity to the

process but it helped us to see that all of us use a variety of resources when we are looking for work or starting a business. Why shouldn't people with disabilities? The result is what some people refer to as "braided" or "amalgamated" funding where a diversity of funding sources are used to provide the maximum support for employment.

We have of course tried to utilize all the services we can access from our local vocational rehabilitation agency. We use their funding for traditional supported employment. Our VR agency is just starting to consider funding customized employment and microenterprise development. As a result, most of those approaches have been funded through our Medicaid agency's funding.

As we said before, we vendored a new service (ACE) which provides one on one supports during the day to pursue employment development and provide ongoing support. This service is funded through the regional center which uses Medicaid and state funding.

We are also pursuing building greater capacity to assist people to use more work incentives from Social Security and other government programs, including the PASS program (Plan for Achieving Self Support,) IRWE's (Impairment Related Work Expenses,) PESS (Property Essential to Self Support,) and Ticket to Work. These programs offer start up funds and ongoing expense allowances that can significantly benefit individuals who are working while on government benefits. For people who own and operate their own businesses, some of these programs can allow a person to build personal financial resources that are not allowed under regular SSI rules.

We utilized the wonderful expertise of Griffin-Hammis Associates, Michael Callahan, Sherry Beamer, Sharon Brent and others to help us understand how to tap into new funding sources and government programs. We have also tapped into community programs for help with small business start up such as the Small Business Administration and the Small Business Development Centers. We've looked into using free services such as the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE), local business schools, and local groups like Chambers of Commerce, Kiwanis and other service organizations.

This approach to employment development also calls on the individual and his/her circle of support to tap into their own resources to support job hunting or small business development. When anyone else in society looks for work or starts a business, they often use their own network of relationships and their own personal financial resources. We have worked with the people we support to see this process as THEIR process which means they should utilize their own resources to the greatest extent possible.

With self-employment there are even more community resources available since self-employment is the fastest growing type of employment in the country. Too many times social service agencies tend to think "program" and forget that there is a whole world out there where other people are doing this every day. We have found that the community has much to offer in support, advice, and sometimes money.

We learned we really have to think differently about this more personalized approach to employment development. We can't just sit back and submit bills to the regional center for funding. We see the need for either in-house or consultant type services to support people to understand and manage their government benefits while earning income. We also are addressing the need to have in-house or consultant resources to guide people in using government programs for start up funding or ongoing work incentives.

We also realized that we have to get a lot more “business like.” We can’t operate in social services mode for these approaches. We need to act like business people, talk like business people, make decisions like business people, and use resources like business people. That means that we need to bring in more people with business expertise and experience – both on staff and as advisors. We need to look for different qualifications for staff than we have in the past.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- Our main challenge in this area was that this braided funding strategy is requiring a lot of “ramping up” for us to learn about alternative sources of funding and how to use them.
- Government programs through Social Security and other government sources can be complex and intimidating. We are working on building capacity within our organization to have people who are trained in advising people on how to manage their benefits while earning income and how to tap into these government sources of funding.
- Another challenge is that individuals and their families are often very afraid to take a chance on complicating the person’s government benefits. The programs are complex and require knowledgeable support and maintenance to keep people out of trouble with their benefits.
- Some old staff did not do well with making the shift to a more business orientation. They have moved over to our community inclusion service or have left the agency.
- People with disabilities also face many years of people telling them they cannot work or they will “lose their benefits.” This creates a mindset against employment, especially for people with severe disabilities. People get stuck in poverty and perpetually dependent on the system as a result.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- What sources of funding do we use now? Are we using them to their fullest extent?
- What new sources of funding can we find in the system and in the community?
- How will we gain the expertise that is needed to support people to utilize these new sources of funding?
- How will we provide ongoing consultation and guidance to people to manage their government benefits and work incentives?
- How will we create partnerships and working agreements with the various government and community agencies that offer support for employment?
- Are we thinking beyond just the disability system in looking for both funding and expertise?
- Do we have the right people to help us? Do we need more business people assisting us? Do we need to look for different qualifications when hiring for employment support services?

Key Change Element: Establishing and Using a System of Accountability and Quality Assurance to Support Employment

What we learned:

One thing we know is that things don’t happen just by wishing them to happen. We have to have good ways to track outcomes and establish lines of responsibility. We developed the Employment Toolkit as a personalized tracking and recording system for following the necessary steps of the process of pursuing employment.

Within the department, we moved all employment support under one supervisor so the line of responsibility was clear in our organizational structure. That department could focus on developing the knowledge, skills, and processes that would strengthen our ability to support employment outcomes.

We have instituted more team meetings to address issues and problem solve together. We are setting up groups of people who are seeking employment to talk with each other and share thoughts and feelings during the process.

We also revised our data recording and reporting process to make sure we are tracking what is important to track.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- While we were tracking employment data for people in supported employment, we had to add in the people who were being served in our ACE program.
- We had difficulty maintaining clear lines of responsibility at times for employment outcomes with staff changing.
- As always, our financial resources right now make it difficult to have the personnel to address quality issues, data management, and staff training in the way we would like to.
- Quality is very much related to staff training and supervision. Budget reductions have “leaned out” our management structure which reduces the amount of time supervisors have to spend with each individual and support staff.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- Are we tracking the types of data that give us the information we need to see if we’re on target with the outcomes we want to see?
- Do we have ways to look at the data we are collecting to learn from it and make adjustments in how we are supporting people?
- Do we have a system that allows for clear lines of responsibility and accountability?
- For each individual seeking employment, do we know whose job it is to support him/her through the process and to track progress? Does the individual know who that person is and what to expect from him/her?
- Do we have a system in place to look at the quality of our outcomes and modify our processes to increase our productivity?

Key Change Element: Establishing and Using a Person Centered Planning Process to Support Employment

What we learned:

Our organization has been doing person centered planning for supported living for nearly 20 years. While we had been doing individualized vocational profiles for some time in our supported employment service, we needed some help in understanding more customized planning processes for employment.

We worked with Cary Griffin, Dave Hammis and Michael Callahan to learn the basics of customized employment. The first step in that process is learning the person centered assessment process for employment called “Discovery.” Through the detailed process of discovery, we can learn in depth information about who a person is and what he/she has to offer the world of work. By starting with the person and his/her skills, talents, passions, and community connections, we can work with the individual and his/her circle of support to find or develop an employment opportunity.

Too many supported employment programs operate from the old model of finding job openings, putting in applications, and hoping for an interview. We learned that this model does not work for very many people—especially in this economy where there is tight competition for every opening. We learned that the best employment situations are ones that are created with an individual by defining key elements for the individual and then actively exploring the community to find a place where those elements come together to produce income --income both for the job seeker and the employer.

We learned too that we can't just have a job developer out there “beating the pavement.” We need to work with the individual, his/her circle of support, and all of their connections in the community. We're not looking for charity. We're looking for situations where the person's unique set of skills and interests overlap with an opportunity to help an employer make money.

This approach takes talking with employers and others knowledgeable about the area of interest for the individual. It takes spending time in a company to see first hand if the environment will work for the individual. It takes trying out some aspect of the potential employment idea such as doing a short work trial in a company.

We also learned that self-employment may be an option that becomes obvious as we learn about an individual and what makes sense for an individual to do for work. We learned that this option is not for everybody and should be a clear choice for an individual (not a default answer for people we can't figure out anything else!) In self-employment, we learned that the business has to be a real business, not just a little hobby activity. It needs a full business plan and advice from experts on whether it can be a viable way to make money.

The employment situations which are well matched to the individual's skills and interests and help employers to make money are the key to long term employment success for individuals. To do this, we definitely had to spend the time to get to know the individual and to find the match within the business world.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- This type of approach to job development is labor intensive (although if the job lasts it will reduce the need for repeated job placements in the future.) It's difficult --when you have a number of people waiting to find work-- to slow down and take it one person at a time and do it effectively (even though you know there is no shortcut to doing things right.)
- It is taking some time to train enough staff in the process of discovery to complete the process with each person seeking employment. Staff turnover makes it difficult to keep people trained sufficiently.
- This approach is different for everyone. Some of our funders and even the families are used to the old method that does not involve taking the time and making the connections that are needed to do this process correctly. Some families want a program to take care of everything and not involve them. Other families were very willing to work together to create opportunities.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- How are we approaching the job development process? Do we look for job openings and then match them to people we support?
- How can we truly start with the person first and get a good understanding of the person's skills, interests, and community connections before potential jobs are identified?
- What attitudes and values do we need to examine in order to approach this one person at a time?
- Where can we learn about Discovery and how we can use it to do person centered job development?
- How can we get our staff proficient in the use of Discovery techniques and assure they are using the process effectively?
- How do we help the people we support and their families understand this different approach to employment development?
- How do we help our funders and other stakeholders to understand and support this approach?
- What will be our process of documenting and learning from this approach with each individual we support?

Key Change Element: Assuring Effective Training, Mentoring, and Coaching to Support Employment Outcomes

What we learned:

It's obvious that if an organization wants to have different outcomes, you have to have new ways of thinking and new processes. Many organizations set goals for new directions but then do not do the difficult work of challenging the old ways of doing things.

We needed to get everyone up to speed on new ways of thinking and acting on our commitment to employment opportunities for everyone. One year of a grant is just a beginning, of course. This will be an ongoing process for us for a long time.

Given that we have very limited funding for training, we decided to do some of the training with staff and the individuals we support together during regular support hours. This approach ended up with a very positive outcome in that staff and the people we support bring different perspectives to a discussion. It was very helpful to have them together to hear each other. Having the people we support in the room when we're talking about these issues keeps the conversation real and honest.

We did more focused training with our mid-management level staff to help them develop more expertise that they could pass on in on-the-job training. The approach also helped us to stretch our training dollars. We used our grant funding for some of the training and we looked for shared training with other organizations. We have also developed relationships over the years with people we can call on when we get stuck with an employment issue.

Here are some of the topics we covered in training:

- Orientation to employment for people with disabilities
- Attitudes and values about employment for people with disabilities
- Person centered planning process for employment
- Discovery/person centered job development
- Customized employment
- Self-employment
- Systematic instruction and other tools for teaching skills
- Benefits management
- Developing personalized job supports that include natural supports
- Working with employers
- Community resources for employment

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- As we've said before, budget constraints do not give us a lot of extra funding for the training we continue to need to keep ourselves skilled and knowledgeable about customized employment practices.
- The benefits management area is one in which the rules and programs are changing all the time. It's difficult to keep a number of people up to speed on what they need to know in order to give people good advice in this area. We are looking at how to create in-house or consultant expertise so that people can be supported to manage their benefits effectively while working.
- As do all organizations, we operate with staff turnover, promotions, and reassignments that disrupt the intention of keeping staff well trained in these techniques and attitudes.
- Some staff responded better than others to changing their approach to employment development. Old ways get ingrained and resurface if you are not on top of them.
- We need better ways of making sure staff are implementing each step of the Toolkit effectively.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- What skills, knowledge, and attitudes do we want our staff to have in order to work toward the employment outcomes we want to see? What about the people we support and their families? Others?
- How can we get people trained and efficient in this new approach? What training structure makes sense for us? What resources do we have or need to obtain in order to make this happen?
- How will we keep an eye on people's skills, knowledge, and attitudes as we progress on this journey?
- How can we keep lines of communication open with everyone so they can let us know what support and training they need?
- How can we continue to learn as we go in finding good ways to support people to realize employment outcomes?

Key Change Element: Assuring Effective Ongoing Support to Individuals

What we learned:

It's not enough to get people good jobs or help them start their own businesses. We need to focus attention on the supports and assistance that will be needed to make a success of that employment situation long term.

Part of that equation related to making sure we didn't just "dump" the person in a job and hope the job coach and he/she could work through any problems that come up. We got training in systematic instruction which showed us how to improve our teaching skills so that people could be competent in their employment situations. We tried to anticipate support needs before the job started so we could facilitate natural on-the-job supports and supplement with job coaching. We strive to look for ways to fade out the job supports and prevent the job coach from becoming an obvious and necessary part of the success of the job.

We know that social integration into the work place is also an important factor in the success of an employment opportunity. We know we need to look at how the person can learn the ropes of what it means to be an employee in a work environment.

Part of the success of maintaining employment also comes from reducing the worries of the individual and his family about disruption in critical government benefits. We try to assist the person to make sure he/she has a plan and the support he/she needs to report income and manage government benefits effectively.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- Individuals are often so desperate to have a job that they will take ones that aren't as good a fit as we would like. We get pressure from families and the system to "make placements." The ongoing support needs sometimes become much greater because the match is not as good as we'd like.
- Jobs often need to start right away—making the preparation period shorter than we might hope for.
- Government benefits programs are very complicated and require a level of expertise that needs to be maintained as rules and procedures change. We are looking at putting in place in-house or consultant services to advise people in managing their benefits.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- What steps do we have in our process to set up ongoing support to an individual while he/she is working? Including....
 - Learning the work and social expectations of the new job
 - Setting up on-the-job supports that are as natural as possible and fade over time
 - Keeping up good lines of communication with the individual, his circle of support and the employer.
- How will we support each individual to create a benefits management plan and provide ongoing support to him/her to manage his/her government benefits?
- How will we maintain the expertise we need to understand government work incentives and benefits management?

Key Change Element: Telling People's Stories

What we learned:

Numbers and data alone cannot tell the story of an individual's or organization's journey to full employment. We learn how to do this by walking with people and seeing what works and doesn't work for each person we support.

In order to learn from the people we serve, we have to keep track of each person's story. Discovery is the beginning of the process of learning who an individual is and what makes sense for him/her. We need to continue that process of recording what is happening with the person and how it is affecting the desired outcomes in the person's life.

The Employment Toolkit offers a place to record what steps are being taken with an individual and the results that are observed. Teams need to make a commitment to continue to tell the person's story and to learn from the different aspects of his/her journey. Stories can also be told in picture form—creating a digital photo or video record of the successes and challenges in a person's life.

If we don't record what's happening, individuals are doomed to keep experiencing the painful effects of the system's "learning curve" with each new staff or new program. Teams who share information and brainstorm new ideas and approaches can make enormous contributions to a person's life by seeing patterns that lead to success or failure for an individual.

Personal stories are also ways to celebrate the achievements in a person's life. Too often we are so caught up in the next "crisis" that we don't take the time to enjoy success with a person—however small the success might be. Keeping a journal or other personal account of what is happening can help us see which directions make sense for the person and which do not.

Having a personal story or journal is also a good way for various people in the person's circle to communicate and understand what the others are doing. Each person in an individual's life has a different perspective that they bring to the conversation. Sharing ideas and thoughts help others to benefit from the different perspectives.

For organizations, keeping a record of each individual's journey can help the organization to see trends and patterns in their own support system. Seeing that several individuals are having trouble with managing their benefits, for instance, might indicate that the organization's benefits management support needs to be adjusted or changed.

It's important to tell your agency's story too. We learn from examining what we are doing-- honestly and openly – and comparing stories with other organizations that are on the same journey. We need to commit to taking the time to learn from what we are doing everyday and with every person we support.

Challenges We Faced in This Area:

- It's often difficult to find the time to do things like telling someone's story when budgets and cutbacks have reduced staffing down to bare bones. Even though we know it's important and will help to improve decision making, it can get lost in the shuffle of everyday crises and required tasks.

- We need to continue to make time for looking at our organization's commitment to employment for all and how we are doing in honoring that commitment.

Questions to Ask in Your Organization:

- What mechanisms do we have in place to record each individual's personal story of pursuing employment?
- What processes do we have in place that will allow us to learn from what has happened in someone's life?
- Are we taking the time to celebrate and honor the achievements of both the individual and the support people in the person's life?
- Are we considering and telling our organization's story in pursuing employment opportunities for everyone? Do we have ways to learn from what is happening?
- Do we have ways to look at the "big picture" and not just the day to day operations of our services?

Conclusion:

As we said before, we are only at the beginning of this journey of supporting employment for all people regardless of their disability or support needs. We have many challenges and roadblocks, but we believe that we are on the right path.

We know we don't have all the answers, but we trust that we are beginning at least to ask the right questions. We welcome any ideas or input from anyone else who is on the same journey.

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