

Impediments to Employment and Job Retention for Individuals with Intellectual and Other Developmental Disabilities

Finding and keeping good workers are among the greatest challenges facing business today. To stay competitive, businesses will need access to a skilled and diverse workforce. Competition and increased profitability will not occur without qualified employees. Individuals with disabilities are a source of qualified workers that are frequently overlooked and are one of the most underemployed populations in our society. The Bureau of Labor Statistics, (December 2009) employment reports the overall unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities was 13.8 percent, compared with 9.5 percent for those with no disability. According to the 2007 American Community Survey (ACS) conducted by Cornell University, the District of Columbia unemployment rate for working age individuals with disabilities ages 21– 64 is an astounding 67%. Among these, eleven percent (11%) are individuals actively seeking work but are not currently working. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of individuals with disabilities are working age and have attained a high school diploma or equivalent.

There are many factors that negatively affect employment opportunities and job retention for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. The Consumer Advisory Council (CAC) of the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (GU-UCEDD) began a process to explore these factors. The CAC found that some of the factors described below may be specific to the District of Columbia, but many are universal and reflect barriers that exist towards outreach, hiring, and retention of individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities.

Transportation Barriers

When individuals with disabilities are not able to travel independently or public transportation services are not readily available, getting to work on time can become problematic. In addition, many individuals with disabilities require services such as those of a direct care support professional who adds a layer of coordination. When transportation services are not reliably provided to individuals with disabilities, their ability to get to work on time is often compromised and in turn, jeopardizes their job security. With many municipalities under pressure to reduce costs, these services are in further threat for cutbacks and reduced service for those who rely on them the most.

According to the National Organization on Disability (NOD, 2000), the accessibility and availability of transportation remains an obstacle that confronts individuals with disabilities in getting to work and socializing outside the home. The transportation gap is significant. A minority, 3 out of 10 individuals with disabilities (30%) still has a problem with inadequate transportation; however, 16% cite inadequate transportation as a major problem. By contrast,

only 1 out of 10 individuals without disabilities (10%) have a problem with inadequate transportation – and only 4% say it is a major problem (NOD, 2000). In addition, inadequate transportation is an even greater obstacle for individuals with significant disabilities. Individuals with somewhat or very severe disabilities are more than three times as likely to think transportation is a problem (34% and 36% respectively) than individuals without disabilities (10%) and twice as likely as people with slight disabilities 17% (NOD).

Transitioning from School to Work

Transitioning from school to work is a challenging time for young adults. However, for young adults with disabilities these challenges can be extremely overwhelming. A major ingredient of a successful school-to-work transition program is a comprehensive, multidisciplinary vocational assessment that integrates a variety of school and community agency personnel into the assessment process. The assessment process should include teachers, counselors, a psychologist, as well as representatives from community vocational rehabilitation and social services agencies, who work together to identify relevant transitional needs and appropriate planned services (Levinson, E., & Palmer, E., 2005). Whether they transition to school, jobs, or supported living environments, students with disabilities can benefit from coordinated efforts among professionals. Most importantly, the development of a Transition Plan should reflect the student's interest and choice of a vocational direction. Students with disabilities should be provided with opportunities to develop self-awareness and self-determination skills in order to advocate for themselves in post-secondary settings (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuael, Leucking, & Mack, 2002). Students should also be provided with the opportunity to sample different types of employment opportunities and participate in internship and employment programs, which is often the best way for them to prepare to enter the world of work.

Work Disincentives

Families and individuals with disabilities may be hesitant to seek work, particularly for limited income, when that income threatens vital benefits, such as Medicaid, Medicare or Social Security eligibility. Individuals with disabilities are often reluctant to become employed for fear of jeopardizing these benefits. For many of these individuals, substantial work would be a significant and unreasonable hardship because of the loss of benefits (Mashaw & Reno, 1996). In addition to the fear of losing benefits, other disincentives may include, but are not limited to, extra costs associated with working, education or training gaps, the need for flexible work arrangements, and potential loss of disability income and health care benefits. In addition to these obstacles, barriers also include employer discrimination, reluctance to hire, organizational cultures that are not disability-friendly, stereotypes, and the lack of understanding of the legal requirements and associated costs of accommodations.

Environmental Barriers - (Assistive Technology/Workplace Accommodations)

Although the American with Disabilities Act, Title I, requires an employer to provide reasonable accommodations in the workplace for individuals with disabilities, there are misperceptions and fears about exactly what constitutes accommodations. For many employers the "Order of

Magnitude” issue still looms large. There is the belief that individuals with disabilities require complex expensive adjustments or high end assistive technology devices and services rather than simple inexpensive equipment or services that are actually required. This kind of thinking often prohibits people with disabilities from having access to certain jobs requiring less expensive technology.

“No accommodation or technology can be maximally beneficial if there is a lack of awareness, of its availability, where it can be obtained, or its proper set up and operations” (deJonge, Scherer, and Rogers, in press). In spite of the increasing availability of technologies for individuals with disabilities, both employers and employees differ in their knowledge of available assistive technology services and supports and the value they ascribe to them. Assistive and other technologies which enable individuals with disabilities to work may not be completely understood or appreciated. In an effort to understand the significance, impact, and benefits of assistive technology to the end-user, more research needs to be conducted, certainly from the perspective of those who hire and manage individuals with disabilities, but also from the viewpoint of the users of these products themselves.

Employer Attitudinal Barriers

The Implementation of Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which outlaws employment discrimination against people with disabilities, was a response to evidence that employers are often reluctant to hire individuals with disabilities based on prejudice, stereotypes, and uncertainty (Braddock and Bachelder 1994). Individuals with disabilities often find employment difficult to attain and feel excluded from the labor market because of their disabilities (Kregel & Unger, 1993). This barrier difficulty is often traced to the attitudes of employers toward hiring individuals with disabilities and the environment of acceptance or non-acceptance employers create (Satcher & Hendren, Wright & Multon, 1991). In addition, surveys conducted of employers on disability issues have further identified important barriers and concerns. Dixon, Kruse, and Van Horn (2003) found that 20% of employers perceived employees discrimination and prejudice, and the reluctance of employers to hire, as major barriers facing workers with disabilities. Only 7% of employers surveyed cited concerns over the cost of making workplace accommodations (Dixon et al., 2003). Apart from any discriminatory attitudes, uncertainty may be a significant barrier to employing individuals with disabilities: Employers may not understand a person’s abilities or know whether he or she can handle the job, and so be reluctant to make any type of investment. There may be subtle prejudicial attitudes when employers expect that the employment of individuals with disabilities will result in higher bottom-line costs because of absenteeism, poorer performance, turnover, accommodation necessities (Stone and Colella 1996), productivity, and worker compensation rates (Fuqua, Rathbun, and Gade, 1983).

Innovative Pilot Transition Program – Promising Practice

The District of Columbia is collaborating with Project Search to develop and implement with a transition program for students with disabilities in their last year of high school. This one-year program is designed for students whose main goal is competitive employment. The District of

Columbia is collaborating with Project Search to develop and implement with federal government agencies a one year high school Educational Transition Program for students with disabilities in their last year of high school. It is for students whose main goal is competitive employment. This particular program takes place in Federal government office settings. It offers an opportunity for total immersion in the workplace, and facilitates the process of teaching and learning through continuous feedback and application of new skills. The students have an opportunity to rotate through a variety of position experiences. Individualized job development and placement begin after the rotations are completed. Students are given support through on-the-job coaching and work site accommodations with the ultimate goal of independence. Project Search is currently being implemented in the U.S. Department of Labor.

Next Steps

There are some recommendations that may improve the employment picture for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities in the District of Columbia:

Quality Control measures:

- Meeting with the local Transportation Administrations in the Metro DC area to discuss the need for improvements in reliability and service and how to preserve these in the face of budget cuts.
- Meeting with Service Providers to discuss barriers to employment and an action plan to reduce barriers.

Transition Planning

- Transition training for students, parents, special education coordinators, school principals, service coordinators and rehabilitation counselors.
- Explore partnership with family serving organizations to conduct in-depth training for family members.

Work Disincentives

- National issue - investigate best practices by other states to address this issue,
- Explore partnerships and information exchanges with other entities that have been successful in reducing barriers.

Environmental Barriers

- Educate the consumer, family members and employers on the protections under the federal and local laws.
- Public relations campaign and marketing of local success stories, from both individuals' with disabilities and the employers' perspective

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