

ATTAINMENT'S

Overcoming the Odds



**Vocational Success Stories
of People with Significant Disabilities**

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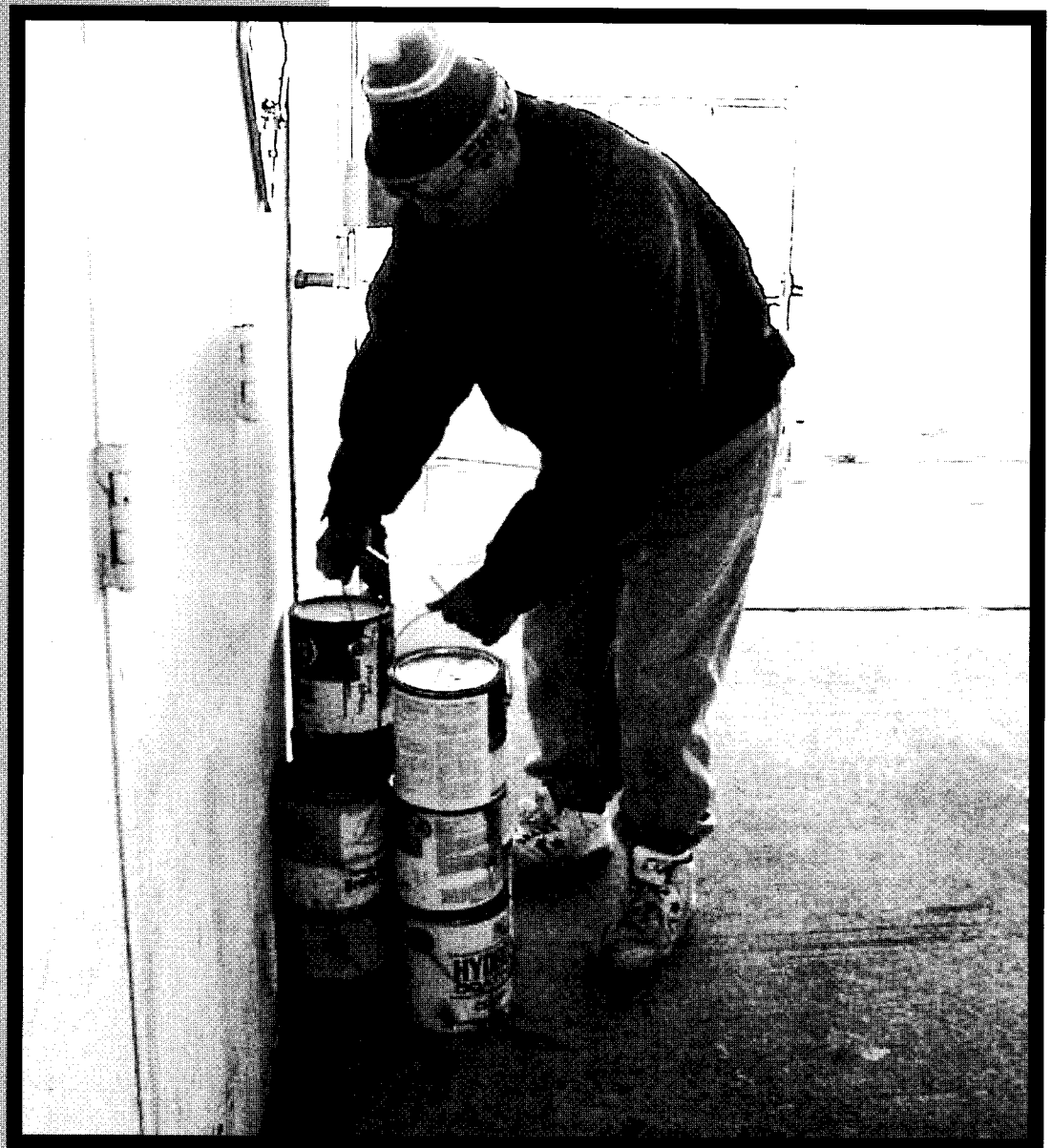
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Introduction



*"There is no such thing as being too disabled
for services."*

Introduction

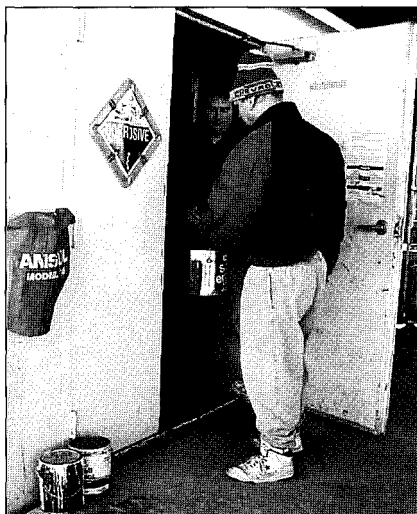
SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT across the country is typically available for adults with mild to moderate developmental disabilities, primarily those with a cognitive disability. Supported employment has existed in various formats (individual job sites, enclaves, mobile work crews, etc.) for almost 20 years. Trends and styles in providing services have changed over the years, but one thing becoming increasingly clear is that people with significant disabilities are living longer and demanding (or their guardians are demanding for them) community-based, integrated work opportunities. Some parts of the country have ventured tentatively into the realm of supporting people with higher (and therefore more intense) support needs. Services in Dane County, Wisconsin, have always included a “zero reject” policy. There is no such thing as being “too disabled for services.” This commitment to services for all people with developmental disabilities has created an atmosphere of collaboration among school vocational programs and supported employment agencies for training, sharing job leads, and brainstorming for creative solutions. As a result, people with challenging behavior, limited physical abilities, and/or moderate to low or even severe/profound levels of cognitive impairment have all been receiving supported employment services. Local area schools typically develop a series of training locations to provide work opportunities for their students throughout their high school years, ultimately finding the right match of skills, interests, abilities and type of job. That way a proper job search can occur to find a successful job match during the student’s last year in school. In Dane County, students must graduate with employment in order to receive supported employment services post-graduation. Otherwise, the student’s name goes to a waiting list for services. This incentive process helps schools and agencies work together to ensure smooth transitions from school to work and good faith efforts in appropriate job/worker matches.

Because of the wide variety in skill levels of people receiving supported employment services in Dane County, traditional methods of measuring success (is the person working independently at competitive wages?) have been set aside. Instead, supported employment providers have developed their own standards for success:

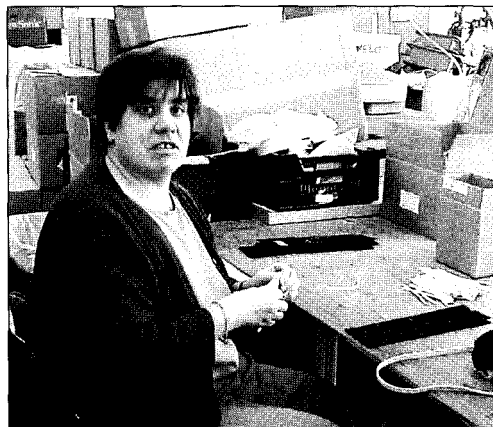
- Is the person employed?
- Does he/she appear to enjoy working?
- Are wages appropriate?
- Is there interaction with coworkers?
- Is there general satisfaction with this job choice?



Successful transition into supported employment requires considerable cooperation between school and adult service providers.



Supported employment is not necessarily the least expensive vocational option.



Up until 10 or so years ago, cost was the strongest argument in favor of supported employment. Theoretically, if you could place a person in a job, teach him/her to do the job, and set the situation up (proper job match, “natural supports” from cooperating coworkers, environmental cues) so that the person could work independently, then you were providing a cost effective service. Not only was the person working independently, that person was now a wage earning, tax paying, contributing member of society.

Today the cost-effectiveness of supported employment is not as clear as it once was

As people with higher support needs continue to enter our service delivery system they will impact our value system and raise questions about our role as supported employment providers. Will our agencies provide only supported employment services? Will we branch out to include recreation and leisure activities, teach activities of daily living, sponsor social events or take people to doctor’s appointments? Are sub-minimum wages acceptable? Is providing a job coach an acceptable adaptation?

Following are examples of people overcoming the odds of their developmental disabilities to be productive and accepted members in their work places. These examples show that success is not easy, it is not pretty, and it may never be cost effective due to the person’s support needs. Yet, it will prove that we should not measure success by old standards, nor can we expect that all we know about supported employment will make services easy for people with significant disabilities. When a crisis occurs, we cannot, in all good consciousness, wait for coworker supports, environmental cues or natural consequences to take place. In many cases a job coach is the best and most appropriate accommodation. That does not mean coworker support, environmental cues and natural consequences should be ignored, or that they should not be part of an overall goal. It just means that we, as professionals, must continue to challenge ourselves to find ways of building with those blocks of success. We cannot put a price on the quality of life, especially when the alternative to supported employment is staying at home, going to a non-integrated workshop, or being institutionalized. Quality services put a premium on creativity.

Sensitivity Training

One of the most creative methods of promoting success is to include employers and coworkers in the process of transitioning someone with a developmental disability into a new job. This can most easily be done through **sensitivity training**. A key to successfully integrating a supported employee into a work place is to provide the supervisor and coworkers with as much positive information as possible, perhaps by giving illustrations about other businesses in the area participating in supported employment, and by emphasizing the gifts and positive qualities this new worker will bring. By planting seeds of enthusiasm and bringing out the good business sense for hiring the new employee you simultaneously provide interest and education.

Much has been made of the importance of positive job development, proper job matches, and creative job carving. One of the most critical situations, though, is handling the first challenge at a new job. Some support staff face it several weeks into the experience, some face it within the first five minutes of bringing someone to the job, while others face it in the parking lot long before even entering the building! Knowing that bases have been covered and issues discussed helps support staff deal with the staring, whispering and inevitable silence as they approach people in the work place. Sensitivity training can be a great help in these circumstances. Personal experience illustrates that employers, even those already convinced that supported employment will be a good business decision, really appreciate any information and education that can be provided to employees. The point of sensitivity training is not to divulge intimate or private details, but to be proactive, providing helpful information and background on a specific disability, and explaining how the characteristics of that disability are manifested in the new employee. It is important to talk about strategies for task teaching and support, and to discuss the role of the job coach. A brief background on the supported employment agency, its funding and referral process, and some of your own experience and education helps justify your qualifications for providing this information. Any sharing of information, done in a respectful manner, will go far to open doors of communication and acceptance. People like to feel they are part of a creative solution.

Sensitivity training is an opportunity to educate coworkers at a job site about supported employment. Training sessions also offer a little history about the agency, explain what the role of the job coach will be with the new worker and present expectations and any other information that might help in integrating the new worker. If the job coach is to be used as the accommodation, then this is a perfect opportunity to explain that role. Topics such as communication styles/methods, interests and hobbies, and any accommodations can be brought up. Offer this training as part of your services to employers participating in supported employment.



One method of promoting success is to include employers and coworkers in the process of transitioning someone with a developmental disability into a new job with sensitivity training.