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Delphi Panel Findings, Brief # 1: Introduction, Values, and Major Themes

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Background

The Employment Learning Community (ELC) is an Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities-funded project that promotes systems change to improve competitive employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The ELC's primary activities are technical assistance and peer-to-peer networking and information sharing through Communities of Practice (CoPs). Through a competitive process, seven states were selected as members of the ELC: District of Columbia, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and North Dakota.

Participating states are required to have a consortium focused on employment systems change. Consortium members represent state agencies, the developmental disabilities network, educators, and service providers. State project staff and their consortium members select topics for Communities of Practice and participate in those CoPs of interest to them.

In addition to gathering states' input on topics for CoPs, the project convened a panel of national subject matter experts to participate in a Delphi process. Their task was to sort, analyze, and recommend the most cogent policies and practices that promote state systems change. Their final responses will be considered in the formation of new topical CoPs in the last two years of the project.

The Delphi Process

Delphi has been defined as "a social research technique whose aim is to obtain a reliable group opinion using a group of experts. It is a method of structuring communication between a group of people who can provide valuable contributions in order to resolve a complex problem" (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). Three features characterize the process: anonymity for all respondents, iteration with controlled feedback, and statistically interpretable group response. Direct debate is replaced by a carefully crafted process of continual individual interview, along with feedback and synthesis of responses. This method promotes a range of opinions so that any uncertainties associated with a given situation can be more accurately represented (Rowe & Wright, 1999).

The Employment Learning Community has been developed to assist states in improving employment systems and services that will increase inclusive, competitive employment for individuals with IDD. To gain insights on the most cogent policies and priorities to promote such systems change, the project convened a panel of national subject matter experts to participate in a Delphi process. Nineteen Delphi panel members, including employment researchers, service providers, state vocational rehabilitation directors, developmental disability agency directors, educators, self-advocates, family members and representatives from related programs and initiatives, participated in four rounds of data collection. The values, policies, and practices that emerged from this effort are being presented in this series of seven briefs:

1. Introduction, Values, and Major Themes
2. Transition From School to Work
3. Collaboration Across Agencies
4. Education and Training for Job Seekers
5. Processes Within State Agencies
6. Generation and Use of Data and Evidence
7. Paths Toward Fair Wages

The 19 ELC Delphi panel members included employment researchers, expert service providers, state vocational rehabilitation (VR) directors, developmental disability agency directors, educators, self-advocates, family members, and representatives from related programs and initiatives. The number of panelists responding to each individual round of questioning ranged from all 19 for the first step to seven for the final step (providing feedback on the draft findings document, which was optional).

To begin the Delphi process, ELC staff prepared an initial questionnaire about employment values, policies, and practices. This questionnaire included seven open-ended questions about which values, policies, and practices were most essential at the local, state, and national levels in the effort to increase employment of people with IDD.

The Delphi process involved four rounds of contact with the panel:

1. In the first round, panelists responded to the open-ended questionnaire described above. This round garnered many ideas, which were grouped into major themes by project staff.
2. In the second round, panelists provided feedback and expanded on the major themes identified by project staff based on the Round 1 responses.



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3. In the third round, panelists were asked to rank-order their top policy and practice priorities in each topical area, as well as the top priorities across topics. Project staff used these rankings to generate a standardized score between 0 and 100 for each item.
4. Finally, project staff compiled the findings into a set of values and priorities for the field, and sought feedback from the panel on this product.

One panel member observed that the process was difficult. *“All of the items we reviewed were very important to systems change. However, we were asked to deeply think about priorities for systems change work. That is what I tried to do.”*

Systems change work is complex, but will benefit when stakeholders prioritize and focus on addressing these priorities. The results presented in this series of seven briefs will be a resource to states in establishing their own priorities for policy and systems change.

This document introduces the Delphi project, the overarching values identified by the panel, and the overarching policy and practice themes that emerged from the process. It is the first in a series of seven publications based on the Delphi panel findings:

1. Introduction, Values, and Major Themes
2. Transition from School to Work
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Values

Delphi panelists identified key values the field should adopt to advance employment outcomes for people with disabilities, and later ranked those values in order of importance. The major values were (in rank order):

1. **Employment First.** (85*) Funding, incentives, and services should be directed toward integrated, competitive employment as the first option. Employment is the starting expectation for all adults, including people with disabilities.
2. **Employment supports should be person-centered and individualized.** (65) People with disabilities should receive the education, skill attainment, and supports they need to succeed. They should be able to pursue their own individual career goals, including work in a variety of sectors, self-employment, and opportunities for career advancement. There should not be a glass ceiling for advancement of people with disabilities.

3. **Everyone deserves the dignity of working for a fair wage.** (43) There needs to be a movement away from subminimum wage options, such as sheltered workshops. While opinions differ in the field about whether subminimum wage work should be completely eliminated or used only as a last resort, there is agreement that all people deserve fair pay. As one panelist said, “If you and I have the same job and I can do it, then doesn’t that mean I should get the same kind of money?”
4. **Everyone should have equal opportunity to achieve economic self-sufficiency.** (34) In the words of a panel member, “Decades of cultural norms ... assume disability means ‘not working.’ [These are] embedded in policy and practice [and] continue to need to be debunked and reversed.”
5. **The employment field should be driven by the evidence on effective policies and practices.** (30) As one panelist stated, “Policies and practices should be adjusted today and implemented tomorrow based on existing credible evidence about what works.”

Major Themes

The proposed policies and actions suggested by the panelists fell into six major categories, again presented in order of the panel’s overall ranking:

1. Effective approaches to the transition from school to work (68)
2. Collaboration across state systems (60)
3. Understanding the role of education and training for job seekers (58)
4. Next steps within state systems (38)
5. Generation and use of data and evidence to support integrated employment outcomes (35)
6. Paths toward fair wages (33)

Within most of these categories, sub-categories of findings also emerged. These sub-categories, along with their standardized ranking scores, are listed below.

Transition from School to Work

- Providing more and better work experiences for transitioning students (72)
- Making transition planning practices more effective (62)
- Empowering students and families (58)
- Improving partnerships and collaboration at the local level (48)
- Improving partnerships and collaboration at the state level (35)

* Numbers in parentheses are the standardized scores of the item’s ranking across panel members. The standardized scores were calculated as follows: Standardized Score = (sum of scores - minimum score) / (maximum score - minimum score)

- Improving school and agency policies and practices (25)

Collaboration Across Agencies

- [no sub-categories]

Education and Training for Job Seekers

- Increasing use and effectiveness of job skills training (69)
- Increasing use of postsecondary education as a step toward integrated employment (31)

Processes Within State Agencies

- Across multiple agencies, moving toward a more employment-focused state system [steps within agencies] (74)
- Improving the effectiveness of IDD agencies in supporting employment (59)
- Improving the effectiveness of VR agencies for people with IDD (36)
- Involving the broader community (28)

Generation and Use of Data and Evidence

- Developing an evidence base for supported integrated employment practices (62)
- Enhancing collection and use of data (38)

Paths Toward Fair Wages

- Investing in integrated, community-based employment alternatives (85)
- Reducing or eliminating the use of sub-minimum wage options (17)

Conclusions

The Delphi panel has been a valuable process for identifying priority values, policies, and practices to guide systems change toward better employment outcomes for people with IDD.

The seven values identified by the panel provide a base for systems change efforts, while the major policy and practice themes identify priorities for next steps. These themes are expanded on with more specific recommendations in the remaining briefs in this series, forming a rich source of ideas and priorities. Our hope is that the identified values, practices, and policies will inform not only the work of the Employment Learning Community, but also the efforts of others working to improve employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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The Employment Learning Community (ELC) is a project of ThinkWork at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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