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Research to Practice: The Influential Role of the Job Developer: Increasing Self-Determination and Family Involvement During the Job Search

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Introduction

Job developers can influence decision-making during the job search and placement process. For a study exploring the employment decisions of people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD), researchers interviewed 16 individuals with IDD, their family members, and professionals involved in their job search. Participants were asked what factors, circumstances, or people affected their decisions about work. The job developer was consistently named the most influential person in the job-search process.

The job developer affects not only the actual job outcome, but also the individual's job choices. The influence of the job developer also impacts the involvement of family and other supports in the job-placement process. This brief illustrates ways in which the job developer influences the placement process, and offers strategies for maximizing self-determination and family involvement.

Findings

Individuals perceived the job developer as the person responsible for job-finding. This perception limited opportunities for job seekers to assert their own choices.

Individuals often viewed their job developer as the person who was responsible for finding employment, relying on him or her to identify and choose a job. Even when individuals felt a strong sense of personal responsibility in the employment-search process, they always reported the job developer as being the person who was most responsible for job-finding.

The job developer also had a significant impact on whether or not an individual chose to accept a job. Employment professionals we interviewed said that when they enthusiastically presented a job opportunity, workplace environment, or set of tasks, the individual typically responded positively and wanted to accept the job offer. Therefore, staff set the tone for whether a job offer was acceptable or not based upon how they described the opportunity to the job seeker.

Because of this strong influence, some individuals felt they had limited choice in their job placement. In these cases, feelings of having limited choice were due to the belief that the responsibility for finding a job resided with the job developer.

On the other hand, when job developers exerted their influence in a way that maximized individual choice, the job seeker was empowered and actively engaged. This was the case for one individual, who after being given encouragement by her job developer, began making her own employment choices even when these choices were different from what her family wanted.

Families perceived job developers as experts, which affected their involvement in the job search and placement process.

Family members perceived job developers as having superior knowledge and skill in helping the individual to find employment, and relied on their expertise.

Family members appeared to be more engaged in the process of career planning than the process of actually searching for a job. Several of them expressed an interest in being more involved, though they cited barriers to their involvement. These included: not wanting to be viewed as a hovering parent, limited communication from employment staff, and feeling as though they did not have the expertise to help search for a job.

On the other hand, a family's confidence in the job developer sometimes allowed the job seeker to exert more control over the process. Families were often comfortable with the way the job developer and job seeker were working together. This allowed the job seeker more control over their employment process.

Justin's Story

Justin is a young man in his late 20s, living near a large city. He has many interests and is bright and energetic. His parents are always involved and regularly check in on his progress finding a job. Justin's job developer describes him as "a good self-advocate…he knows what he likes, he knows what he wants, and he will let you know if he doesn't like something." Justin, his family, and his job developer agree that they have a great working relationship. Justin and his family are confident in the job developer's skills and trust his advice.

Both Justin and his parents have expressed their desire for community employment for many years; even before he graduated from high school, they knew he wanted to work in the community. Despite this, Justin's job developer reported that after multiple assessments, he was not yet ready to work in the community. In fact, the job developer noted that with Justin, "You wouldn't even need to do an assessment to realize he wasn't ready." As a result, Justin has taken part in work crews and short-term internships, and participates in a sheltered workshop. He continues to work on his behavior and social skills.

Justin reported dissatisfaction with his job in the workshop, while waiting to be determined ready for a job in the community. When asked why he chose the workshop job, he explained, "This job I'm working at now was put onto me for now until I get a new job." He went on to say, "They stuck me into the sheltered workshop job." Justin's parents remain frustrated about the slow process of getting Justin into community work. They continue to remain very involved in supporting the work-readiness skills necessary for community placement as suggested by the job developer.

Questions to think about:

- How do the job developer's views about Justin's job readiness impact Justin and his family?
- How has the job developer influenced Justin's current placement?
- How does the job developer perceive and explain employment options to this family?
- Do you think Justin perceives the job developer as responsible for job searching? Why or why not?
- Do you think Justin and his family perceive the job developer as the expert? Why or why not?
- Who in this scenario is directing choices? Why do you think so?

Recommendations for Practice

As both Justin's story and the current study's findings indicate, job developers are perceived as the ones responsible for leading the employment process. This can cause family members and individuals to rely on them, and perhaps allow the job developer to influence choices. Finally, job developers are seen as experts, which can limit individual and family engagement in the job-search process.

Based on these findings, we offer the following recommendations to job developers:

Maximize family engagement:

- Engage the individual's family during the job search and placement process by setting regular face-to-face meetings and communicating periodically via phone and email.

- Create a mutual understanding of the relationship, and determine roles at the outset. Family members have a very strong role in networking, for example, and this can be invaluable during the job search.

- Think of family members as a resource. They are often experts on the individual's skills and support needs. Be sure to engage them in problem-solving.

- Delegate specific tasks to family members. For example, shift transportation responsibilities or networking follow-up calls to family members. This increases individual and family engagement while decreasing the burden of managing a large caseload for the job developer.

- Use a tool like the 30-Day Placement Plan (see sidebar) to help ensure that all participants are informed and have assigned tasks that support the job search.

30-Day Placement Plan: A Road Map to Employment

This *Institute Brief* from ICI shows how to break down the job search into a series of small, workable tasks. This guide offers step-by-step instructions for writing a 30-day plan, and highlights case studies that illustrate the process. Get it for free at **www.iciget.it/IB21**

Maximize self-determination:

- Be a helper, not a doer. The job seeker should drive the job search from beginning to end. Success requires their active participation. Remain in the facilitator role, even if it makes the process slower.

- Discuss the concept of self-determination. While some job seekers (with or without disabilities) are familiar and comfortable with exercising choice and directing themselves through services, others are not. For some job seekers, understanding that choices are available, making decisions, and taking responsibility for those decisions are skills that need to be learned.

- Clarify expectations and consequences in understandable terms.

- Respect the job seeker's opinions, even if they are different from your own or seem counterproductive. While you can explain your perspective, the final decision is theirs.

- Ask for suggestions on how to improve the process. Periodically ask the job seeker for feedback throughout your time working together, and use their suggestions to guide the job search.

- Leave room for the job seeker to change their mind or course of action.

- Provide opportunities for job seekers to control funding. Use personal budgets, individual training accounts, and other forms of individualized funding that provide choice and control in the employment-support process.

Conclusion

Job developers need to remain aware of the influence they can have on the job search and placement process. They must be careful to avoid leading the job search and diminishing job seekers' self-determination and family involvement. Through the recommendations in this brief, job developers can promote job seekers' involvement and their families' full participation in the job search and placement process.

Self-Determination: A Fundamental Ingredient of Employment Support

This *Tools for Inclusion* brief from ICI explains how to put the job seeker at the center of their own job search. This guide shows ways for job seekers to discover their own wants and needs, determine their employment goals, and choose resources to achieve those goals.

Get it for free at **www.iciget.it/TO22**

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