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From Sheltered Work to Competitive Integrated Employment: Lessons From the Field (Bringing Employment First to Scale, Issue No. 11)

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BRINGING EMPLOYMENT FIRST TO SCALE

From Sheltered Work to Competitive Integrated Employment: Lessons From the Field

By Amie Lulinski, Jaimie Timmons, & Stephane Leblois

Key Findings from the RRTC on Advancing Employment

Introduction

Community providers across the nation are embracing the transformation from facility-based employment supports to competitive integrated employment. While many providers believe in inclusion and Employment First for the individuals they support, some struggle to make their vision a reality. The process of organizational transformation can seem daunting without an understanding of the full range of tactics and approaches available.

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI), in conjunction with The Arc of the United States, is conducting research to better understand the transformation process and to guide the development of tools and resources for providers seeking to transform their services. As part of this research, phone interviews were conducted with leaders from eight provider organizations that have successfully undergone transformation away from sheltered workshops towards competitive integrated employment.

This brief offers lessons learned from their experiences to other providers who are embarking on their own organizational change processes.

Who did we interview?

We interviewed executive directors and other key leadership personnel from eight provider organizations, selected from 28 that were nominated in response to a national announcement. The eight provider organizations all shared the same three characteristics: 1) they underwent successful transformation to competitive

Competitive integrated employment is defined within the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act as full-time or part-time work at minimum wage or higher, with wages and benefits similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and fully integrated with co-workers without disabilities:

<https://goo.gl/JsRZq5>

Competitive integrated employment includes both supported employment and customized employment, both important approaches for individuals with limited exposure to the labor market.

integrated employment within the past 10 years, 2) they no longer use sub-minimum wage, and 3) the majority of individuals whom they support have intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD). Phone interviews were semi-structured and lasted about an hour.

What did we ask?

Interviewees were asked to provide an overview of their transformation process, including key players and motivating factors, strategic planning and prioritization of implementation strategies, communication approaches and engagement with key stakeholders, lessons learned, and advice they would share with others beginning a similar process.

Based on the information gathered during these interviews, researchers selected four finalists to engage in in-depth case study research. For more information about these case studies, please see the “What’s Next” section below.

Findings: Advice from providers

Interviewees from the eight provider organizations provided a wealth of information related to their transformation processes. This advice fell into four key action areas:

1. Commit
2. Plan
3. Implement
4. Engage

“Your worst competitor is the one that opens tomorrow without the traditional models. We need to renew ourselves. Have to tackle the resistance to change.”

COMMIT

“Don’t start doing this until you believe it.”

A critical element to transformation is the commitment of all levels of organizational staff and the board. Commitment is not in attitude only. It often requires shifting the culture through active steps that demonstrate the new vision.

RRTC on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

A project of

ThinkWork!

at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston



Providers showed their commitment in many different ways:

- » Identifying an internal champion who took the lead in getting others on board.
- » Involving stakeholders “early and often” (see Engage section below for more).
- » Ceasing to accept contract work or phasing out of existing contracts (their doors were still open, but they were not providing sub-minimum wage work).
- » Replacing branded vans with cars in an effort to be more integrated into their communities.
- » Committing resources to allow frontline staff to attend conferences, certification courses, and trainings.

“It was a lot of hard work. We were tired. But what we produced at the end is an organization that respects change and innovation.”

PLAN

“Create the plan. Implement the plan. Collect data.”

Organizations agreed that a strong vision should translate into a plan with goals and objectives. This is a necessary element to transformation, as it provides an opportunity to use input from various organizational levels to stimulate a cultural shift.

Many agencies engaged in strategic planning processes, which were often facilitated by an independent third party. Strategic plans were created using input from individuals with IDD, family members, and front-line staff, as well as organization leadership.

Other provider planning strategies included:

- » Creating work groups, task forces, or steering committees to lead transformation efforts. Some even joined statewide coalitions.
- » Investing in specific personnel or creating new positions to achieve the goals and objectives set forth in the strategic plan.
- » Engaging in fundraising to replace or supplement revenue during the transformation, including seeking out grants.

IMPLEMENT

Keep the “long-game in mind.”

Some organizations implemented a gradual transformation, while others set a date when the workshop would be closed. Many noted that it is necessary to allow time to let the process unfold and to allow for individual and organizational flexibility within the framework of the strategic plan.

Strategies included:

- » Understanding who will be impacted, and implementing targeted and triaged movement of one individual at a time into integrated employment supports.
- » Using the workshop only for specific days of the week or specific times of day, and spending the remainder of the work week engaging in job search and community engagement activities.
- » Emphasizing the creation of each individual’s human and social capital, job search skill building, and soft skills during exploration activities.
- » Monitoring outcomes through the collection and analysis of outcome data, including number of days to obtain a job, hourly wage, hours worked, etc. Some invested in database tools such as Salesforce, others relied on the data that they reported on regularly to their funders, and others created their own systems of data collection and reporting.

ENGAGE

Identify key “communication hubs.”

Organizations were in agreement about the importance of engaging stakeholders throughout the transformation process through identification of “communication hubs,” or influencers, among family members and staff. Providers brought these key players together to introduce the vision of integrated employment to others, to have them obtain feedback, and to support them to become “change champions.”

Three main categories of stakeholder groups to engage emerged: individuals and families, the community, and staff members.

Individuals and families:

Interviewees indicated that individuals and families became the most valuable and persuasive allies over time, and expressed the importance of constant and transparent communication with these groups. Provider engagement strategies with individuals and families included:

- » Scheduling regular in-person meetings, both in groups (such as public forums, weekly coffee with the executive director, and focus groups) and in individual settings (such as individual planning meetings and home visits).
- » Sharing the vision and telling stories through media (e.g., newsletters, Facebook posts).
- » Actively being present at local self-advocacy groups.
- » Identifying influencers among individuals and families (e.g., one organization hired an influential parent to lead a parent group, which regularly met regarding status updates).

The community:

Organizations engaged with numerous community entities, including schools, businesses, and civic groups. These relationships allowed the community to learn about proposed organizational changes and allowed partnerships to develop. Many organizations highlighted the need for a communication plan as a means to convey the vision, engage stakeholders along the way, and celebrate successes.

Providers engagement strategies with businesses included:

- » Distributing informational packets.
- » Holding an employer recognition breakfast.
- » Providing employer awards (e.g., Employer of the Year, special certificates for businesses hiring people with IDD).
- » Participating in local Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis Clubs.
- » Creating an employer task force composed of employers who have hired individuals with IDD.

Strategies for engagement with other community members included:

- » Using social media to make the organization's new vision known.
- » Convening meet-ups at local coffee shops.
- » Participating in community events such as blood drives, volunteer opportunities, or community service.
- » Holding meetings in community settings such as faith-based organizations.
- » Participating in events held at community colleges or through city/county departments of parks and recreation.
- » Collaborating with local high schools on student transition plans.
- » Holding special events and fundraisers such as an annual black-tie gala.

Staff members and Board of Directors:

“It was harder on staff than it was for the individuals.”

Organizations recognized the value of engaging with members of their board as well as all levels of staff throughout the transformation process. Interviewees reported that the process was particularly difficult for staff, as it was a change in their daily work routines and job descriptions.

Provider engagement strategies with staff and their boards included:

- » Sharing journal articles and other documentation

from the field about the importance of integrated employment.

- » Reporting regularly on progress, including sharing success stories.
- » Planning field trips to other providers that had successfully transformed.
- » Creating staff teams or committees with all levels of staff about transformation efforts.
- » Providing job development and discovery for staff, and supporting them to customize their own jobs as the structure of the organization changed.
- » Holding employee recognition events in which they acknowledged employees' contributions.
- » Holding an open house after the physical space was transformed from a sheltered workshop to celebrate the new space.

Conclusion

“If we don't believe people can work, why would anyone else?”

Interviews with providers who have completed a transformation indicated the need to commit, plan, implement, and engage. These tips are offered to other providers as considerations during their own transformation efforts.

While finding the right strategy is specific to each provider, and providers go through the transformation process in varying ways and with varying methods, this advice is meant to stimulate thinking and creativity to keep transformation agendas moving forward, no matter where providers are in the process.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Four of the providers were selected to participate in case study research. Findings from this case study research will be used to provide an on-the-ground perspective on successful implementation strategies that emerged with an emphasis on replication.

These findings will also inform a toolkit to support community providers as they transform their employment services. The toolkit will become the basis for technical assistance provided as part of a scalable, facilitated peer-learning community. Researchers will test the impact of provider involvement in this peer network on organizational change and individual employment outcomes in later years of the project.

Bringing Employment First to Scale Key Findings series

The Bringing Employment First to Scale Key Findings series shares research from ICI's ThinkWork projects, which focus on increasing employment for individuals with IDD. The goal of this series is to identify and share findings that support state agencies, providers, advocates, individuals and families to make the philosophy of Employment First a reality.

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The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 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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