Using a Light Touch: Engaging Families Using Facebook Messenger

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Introduction

Research shows that families are essential in the employment process for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Frequently, however, messages they receive about employment are conflicting and can vary between service systems, often due to a lack of coordination across these systems. These conflicting messages can frustrate families and negatively affect their employment expectations and their efforts to support employment outcomes.

The present study examines how a well-planned and individualized engagement strategy could improve families' expectations about employment for their family member with IDD, and how those improved expectations impact the employment planning process.

This pilot focused on engaging participants in completing the Employment and Daily Activities section of The Arc's Center for Future Planning "Build Your Plan" tool. The purpose was to test the impact of an engagement strategy on the creation/maintenance of the employment plan as well as employment beliefs and attitudes of family members.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how individuals with IDD and family members use information and supports to develop an employment vision, and move from that vision to an employment outcome. This study consisted of two pilots, one qualitative and one quantitative, both of which provided the opportunity for transition-age individuals with IDD and their family members to use The Arc's tool to build a plan to achieve an employment outcome.

In this poster, we examine the results of the qualitative study, which has been completed, and which engaged with families on a weekly basis through motivational, informational, and reminder messages in response to families' questions and comments as they developed their plan. The quantitative study is still ongoing.

Pilot design. The pilots consisted of an engagement strategy aimed at encouraging and facilitating the employment planning process by using timely and targeted Facebook Messenger prompts. We encouraged study participants to log into The Arc's future planning tool, and then used Facebook Messenger to create informational and encouraging messages that were relevant to the participant's stage in the planning process (see Table 1 for examples). We interacted with participants via Messenger at least once per week during the six months of the study.

TABLE 1. EXAMPLE FACEBOOK MESSENGER PROMPTS

1. Welcome to the Engaging Families study! We would like to start of with some simple To-Dos about Employment & Daily Activities. The goal of these reminders and conversation is to help you organize information about your son or daughter's employment services. First things first. Let's talk about the big picture?

2. What are you hoping to get out of our conversation?

3. What are some of the challenges you think he/she will face as you work on finding him/her a job?

4. Do you have any ideas about ways to address these challenges? Have they been addressed in the past, and if so, how?

5. What are your goals for the employment of your son or daughter with a disability? What is his or her goals? Tell us about what your interested in?

6. Who supports your family member on these challenges?

7. What are some of his/her strengths?

Method

To test the effectiveness of this engagement strategy, we are measuring its impact on the employment planning process and on employment outcomes, as well as attitudes, vision, and perspectives of participating family members around employment. When we complete the second pilot, we will release our combined findings from both studies.

TABLE 2. PARTICIPANTS IN PILOT 1

	PARTICIPANT AGE					
	18-20	21-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69
Pilot 1	1 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	5 (14.3%)	10 (28.6%)	17 (49.7%)	2 (5.7%)
	AGE OF FAMILY MEMBER WITH IDD					
	14-17	18-21	22-24			
Pilot 1	9 (25.7%)	18 (51.4%)	8 (22.9%)			
	PARTICIPANT GENDER					
	Female	Male				
Pilot 1	34 (97.1%)	1 (2.9%)				

Follow-up interviews. At the conclusion of the pilot, we asked participants a series of qualitative interview questions about their experiences with employment since their participation in the pilot. We also asked them about their experiences with this pilot and what we could do to better engage with families in the future. Our questions are provided in Table 3. What follows are findings from these follow-up interviews.

TABLE 3. SAMPLE FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Process Questions

- **What do you think about using apps or other tools in the future to engage families in planning for employment?**

- **What in your opinion would be the best way to keep contact with family members? Is Facebook the best option, or is there something else that would be better?**

- **What specific areas of knowledge about planning for employment do you think could still be made clearer for families?**

Emerging Results from Pilot Study

The pilot study yielded a number of process findings that might have important implications for service providers and family members.

Families want face-to-face interaction; technology plays a support role.

While most participants admitted that there are advantages to using technology as a way of organizing and motivating around employment, they suggested that technology not replace the importance of face-to-face interactions and getting to know the person with a disability.

"I am a fan of texting because it doesn't take a long time on the phone and it really helps to stay in touch, but it's a supplement… You [still need] the face-to-face meeting and you need email and keep in touch with what's going on, but texting gives you the continuity of the communication which I think is vital."

"I'm one who I hate emails. I hate emails, because in my head. I know what I want to say. However, it might be perceived wrong if they come in through email or text message, that's the same way [with] apps. It could be perceived wrong…I would rather talk to somebody."

Service providers should know about peer-focused opportunities for families.

Families said that employment support providers need to learn about peer-focused methods of support to increase their effectiveness. Participants said that agencies often provide inconsistent information, and that their peer networks were really the place they went to get accurate guidance.

"I actually am a real networker and I met someone back when [my son] was a baby who, who helped me into this whole world. And so I rely on groups…you know, maybe you could get like a group of parent liaison or something to interact with people."

Knowledge around employment needs to be translatable and usable by individuals and families.

"The [state agency's] website had some movie, some little videos of some people who were in different living situations. …That was extremely helpful because it showed that there's some way for the parents to gauge what skill level is required from the kids. This…video had a couple of situations where the people were pretty high functioning. Then it showed a situation where there's someone in a wheelchair, you need a lot of attendant care and that was heartening to me because I thought well, geez, maybe [my son] can actually use this."

In our previous work (Kramer, Bose, & Shepard, 2017), we saw a disconnect between the evidence base in the research literature review and the gray literature review along the kinds of knowledge that families would find useful. Families have indicated that toolkits, guidebooks, and trainings can be confusing or lack information, and cite the need for more individualized, personal approaches.

Information needs to be placed where parents and people with disabilities can find it, and it needs to happen much earlier.

Participants spoke about the importance of placing information at natural points where they are more likely to interact with it in a consistent, sustainable way. Some participants felt a single, comprehensive web page was best, while others felt that going through teachers was best. Participants also clarified that such an approach needs to be consistent and sustainable because not all parents are going to be ready for the information at all times. The approach to families should be staged in a way that allows them to access information and resources when they need them.

"Have a web page kind of thing. But you could do it through Facebook. Okay, just this somewhere that explains everything that you're offering and how to contact you…"

"[A] website letting people (in) earlier on getting them in the loop and then say, you know, even if you're sending out a newsletter that says: 'Check out these resources'…Every month you send this newsletter plus anything that's new… recycling the information, but everybody's at a different point…maybe they're not ready to hear that their kid in a wheelchair with CP and nonverbal could have a job someday, but maybe next year in March they're ready to hear it."

Discussion and Next Steps

The findings from this pilot study suggest that engaging with families around influencing an employment outcome needs to use a balance of in-person and virtual strategies. Participants stated that face-to-face interaction needs to be increased, which poses some challenges to finding scalable, sustainable approaches to engaging with families around employment.

This pilot study suggests that online, virtual strategies, potentially with a face-to-face component, can play an important support role in building relationships between families of people with disabilities and employment service providers.

TO LEARN MORE

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REFERENCE

Kramer, J., Bose, J., & Shepard, J. (2017). *Beyond Training: Engaging Families in the Transition to Employment.* Boston, MA. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umb.edu/ici_pubs/77/