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Characteristics of Effective Employment Services: The Consumers' Perspective

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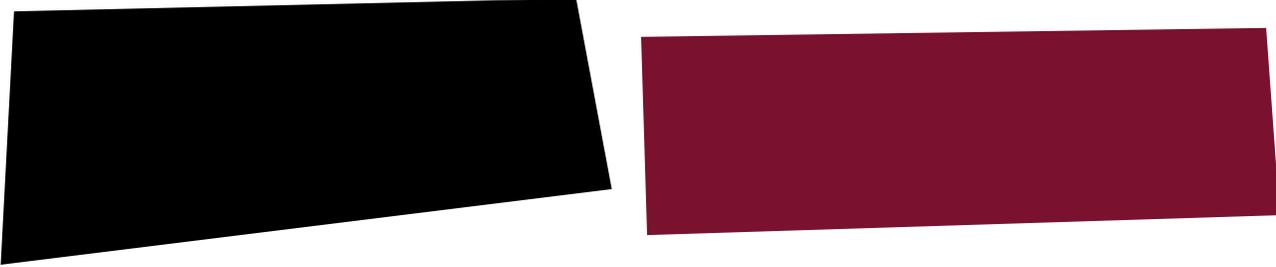
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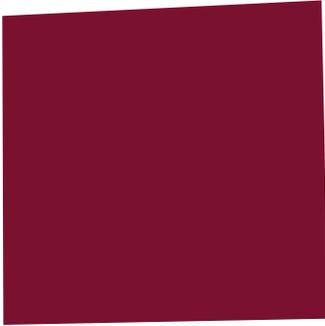
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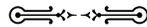


CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE EMPLOYMENT SERVICES: THE CONSUMERS' PERSPECTIVE



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Abstract

This monograph reports on a study investigating the characteristics of effective state service systems. Findings are based on the experiences of individuals with disabilities who have used a state agency (Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Mental Retardation, Department of Mental Health, or One Stop Center) to find employment. Interviews were conducted to examine individuals' experiences with employment services including job search, job entry, strategies that facilitated involvement, supports provided, and barriers experienced. Findings indicated five key components to effective service delivery, including agency culture, consumer-directedness, access to resources, quality personnel, and coordinated services. Obstacles faced during the employment process and personal strategies used to overcome these barriers were also identified. These findings provide information about what job seekers and state systems can do to maximize their experience together. Recommendations for what both parties can do independently and collaboratively to achieve success are offered.

Introduction

With each year that passes, there is increasing emphasis on labor force entry for individuals with disabilities. Considerable attention has been paid to the widespread disparities in employment that exist between individuals with and without disabilities. Compared to their peers without disabilities, individuals with disabilities experience higher rates of unemployment, lower average earnings, limited access to employee benefits, disproportionately high representation in low skilled jobs, and higher rates of poverty (Disability Rights Advocates, 1997). They remain underrepresented in the workforce, with a labor participation rate well below those without disabilities (Louis Harris & Associates, 1998; Burkhauser, Daly & Houtenville, 2000). Across these studies, there is no evidence of meaningful change in the rate of labor force participation over the past ten years, despite substantial policy and systems change efforts.

Individuals with disabilities may receive employment supports from state service systems including both disability-specific agencies such as the state vocational rehabilitation agency, mental health agency, and mental retardation or developmental disability agency, or generic agencies that provide employment supports to all job seekers. This research will explore individual experiences with both disability-specific and generic state agency services. The goal is to identify characteristics of effective service systems, and to better understand the interaction between individuals and the state service system.

Legislative Mandates

In recent years, significant policy change has been directed at improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities, including passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, amendments to the Rehabilitation Act in 1992 and 1998, the formation of the Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities, and the recent passage of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act.

Some of the legislation has focused on removing disincentives to work as a way for individuals with disabilities to gain access to the labor force. The Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999 (TWWIIA) provides health care, employment preparation, and placement services to individuals with disabilities in order to reduce their dependency on cash benefit programs. TWWIIA has as its goal to increase the range of service providers available to beneficiaries with disabilities by providing them with more choices. Individuals who receive SSI or SSDI will receive a ticket that they can award to any approved service provider in exchange for job placement assistance. Administered by the Social Security Administration, implementation of TWWIIA also creates improvements to the SSDI and SSI work incentives programs, establishes benefits counseling projects nationwide, and expands the availability of health care options under the Medicare program in order to provide individuals with disabilities more options while seeking and retaining employment (Silverstein & Jensen, 2000).

The Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities, established in 1998, is another example of a policy initiative that places emphasis on outcome accountability and increased employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. This task force includes representatives from disability services as well as generic systems working together in a consolidated effort to achieve better employment outcomes.

In addition to workforce initiatives for individuals with disabilities, there have been efforts to improve labor force participation of others with traditionally low levels of workforce involvement, such as those living on the margins of economic independence. The establishment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) placed priority on improving the economic status of individuals who receive welfare. Unlike trends for individuals with disabilities, welfare reform appears to have significantly lowered the national caseload of welfare recipients. It is unclear, however, if this caseload reduction is due to reform initiatives, the strong economy, an expanding low-wage labor market, or a combination of these factors (Holcomb, Pavetti, Ratcliffe & Riedinger, 1998). In addition, while PRWORA created policies that promoted self-sufficiency for some sectors of the population, researchers have noted that welfare reform initiatives may negatively affect people with disabilities (Loprest & Acs, 1997; Timmons, Foley, Whitney-Thomas & Green, In press).

There has also been a broad focus on streamlining our nation's employment and training system in recent years. The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) went into effect on July 1, 2000. The central goal of this legislation is to bring together various employment and training systems into an integrated workforce system to meet the needs of all individuals, including people with disabilities. The main mechanism for delivery of services under WIA is through the One-Stop system. These One-Stop Centers are designed to provide a variety of services and resources to all individuals (including those with and without disabilities) who need assistance with finding employment. Although the level of integration of disability-specific agencies and One-Stop Centers varies significantly from area to area, with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) as a mandated partner of the One-Stop Centers, ideally there will be more collaboration between systems and more streamlined provision of services and resources.

As this consolidation takes place, state agencies often experience changing roles. They may find themselves playing a more critical role in the consumer decision to seek employment, while also directing consumers to the most appropriate sources of support. Also, as streamlining takes place, individuals with disabilities who have traditionally received support from disability specific state agencies are now more likely to get support from generic sources such as One-Stop Centers or the welfare system.

The manner in which individuals receive services from these agencies is changing over time as well. In recent years, the theme of empowerment has become increasingly prevalent in the field of human services. This concept can be defined as the transfer of power and control over the values, decisions, choices, and directions of human services from external entities (such as

service providers) to the consumers of the services. The 1992 Rehabilitation Act Amendments strengthened vocational rehabilitation's emphasis on employment of people with more severe disabilities, provided for greater access to services by streamlining the rehabilitation process, and strengthened policy on consumer involvement in the rehabilitation process.

These amendments also contain specific language emphasizing the empowerment of individuals with disabilities through the use of informed choice throughout the rehabilitation process. The amendments require that state agencies must provide or assist individuals in acquiring information that enables them to exercise informed choice in decisions related to the provision of assessment services, the employment outcome, the specific VR services needed to achieve the employment outcome, the entity that will provide the services, the employment setting and the settings in which the services will be provided, and the methods available for procuring the services. This practice serves to give the consumer increased motivation to participate and succeed, and ensures that the services provided are truly what the individual desires (West & Parent, 1992). The idea that individuals with disabilities should be actively involved in the services they receive has become an important aspect within the VR system and other state service systems.

Characteristics of Service Delivery Systems and Consumers

Prior research has identified characteristics of direct support strategies from the perspective of the job seeker. Patterson & Marks (1992) identified determinants of service quality that can be applied to rehabilitation services to promote consumer satisfaction with services. These determinants include reliable services, responsiveness to the needs of the consumer, good communication between counselors and consumers, competent staff, and consumer involvement throughout the process. Consumer education is also important in order to encourage consumer involvement.

In addition to characteristics of direct support strategies, the personal qualities of the individuals who utilize these service systems may also play a role in the service delivery experience. In a study of adults with learning disabilities who had reached vocational success, Gerber, Ginsberg & Reiff (1992) examined personal factors that may contribute to high achievement. The results show that the notion of control is an important contributor to success. Successful individuals make conscious decisions to take charge of their lives and adapt and shape themselves in order to move ahead. These individuals display characteristics such as a strong desire for success, goal-oriented thinking, persistence, good fit with chosen environments, learned creativity, and an ability to develop strong support networks. Another study with a comparable population found similar characteristics of successful individuals. Individuals who displayed high levels of self-awareness and acceptance of their disability were able to recognize their strengths and limitations and accommodate goals and activities accordingly to ensure a manageable environment. They were proactive in setting appropriate goals and were self-directed in identifying means to reach these goals (Spekman, Goldberg & Herman, 1992).

Several studies have examined consumer and counselor satisfaction with the vocational rehabilitation system in terms of consumer choice and involvement. Through a series of focus groups with VR counselors and consumers, Thomas & Whitney-Thomas (1996) identified elements necessary for consumers and counselors to be satisfied with the service delivery process. One important element is the presence of a positive working relationship that involves free exchange of knowledge about services, needs, and expectations between counselors and consumers. A true positive working relationship goes beyond mere coordination of tasks and includes emotional support and shared responsibilities. Communication breakdowns were identified as often the greatest barrier to a positive working relationship. Another key finding was that the more involved and assertive the consumer, the better the services.

Overview of the Research

Purpose of Research and Research Questions

While we know a fair amount about direct employment support strategies for people with disabilities, there is less information regarding the actual experience of using disability-specific and generic employment service systems from the perspective of the individual. There is also little information exploring state agencies as facilitators of both the decision to seek employment and as connectors to services. The purpose of this study is to define the characteristics of effective services at the system level based on the experiences of individuals who have successfully used a state agency to find employment. Qualitative methodology is used to investigate individuals' experiences with state employment services including: job search, job entry, strategies that facilitated involvement, supports provided, and barriers experienced. The following research questions were addressed:

- ▶ What factors influenced an individual's decision to seek employment and assistance from a state service agency?
- ▶ What supports provided by service systems were most useful?
- ▶ What characteristics of state agencies were barriers?
- ▶ In what ways were supports coordinated across state agencies?
- ▶ How do the experiences and supports received by individuals differ across disability-specific and generic agencies or services?

The findings of this study provide information that can be used to guide the policies and practices of state employment agencies so that they may provide the most effective services possible for individuals with disabilities.

Definitions of State System Terminology used in the Research

For the purposes of this research, the term state system is used to describe the entire network of services that any one state offers. Under each state system, there is a range of state agencies, each having a specific organizational structure and mission statement. State agencies may

provide direct services, but also contract with community rehabilitation providers. Community rehabilitation providers are non-state organizations, either nonprofit or for profit, that provide direct employment supports.

State agencies that provide employment supports were targeted for this research project. These included disability-specific agencies (those that support only individuals with disabilities) as well as generic agencies (those that provide employment-related assistance to all job seekers). The following descriptions provide an overview of the types of services that each state agency may provide. It is important to note that the name and the scope of each state agency's services often vary from state to state. The following description emphasizes the structure of the state system in Massachusetts, the site of this research.

Disability-specific agencies.

State Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities Agencies (MR/DD) MR/DD services may include help with job placement, transportation, and personal and living supports for people with mental retardation or other developmental disabilities. State MR/DD agencies vary in their emphasis on integrated employment. These agencies also fund or provide other day services including sheltered employment and non-work day programs.

State Mental Health Agencies (MH) Similar to MR/DD agencies, MH agencies also provide help with job placement, transportation, and personal and living supports. However, this agency focuses its services to support people with mental illness and substance abuse. Typically, MH agencies also provide emergency services, outpatient, and hospital-based treatment services. In general, employment is a very slight focus in most MH agencies.

State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (VR) While MR/DD and MH agencies deliver employment supports as part of a range of services to individuals with disabilities, VR has a primary emphasis on employment-related support. Although individualized employment counseling and job development for individuals with disabilities are among its primary services, VR also provides a range of independent living services.

Generic agencies.

Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) Also referred to as the state welfare agency, this agency provides a temporary cash supplement and employment support to individuals who have encountered economic challenges and who meet income eligibility guidelines. The federal benefit of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is administered through this agency. Individuals with disabilities are just one segment of the overall welfare caseload.

Department of Employment and Training (DET) The state Department of Employment and Training is responsible for the overall development of the workforce in the state. Under WIA, the primary vehicle for implementing DET services is the use of a One-Stop system. This system operates via a network of local One-Stop Centers which are now located in every major population area of the United States. These One-Stops provide a variety of services and

resources to all individuals who need assistance finding employment, including consumers with disabilities. WIA mandates that a number of federally funded agencies which provide employment and training services partner together to form the One-Stop system. The public VR system is the only disability specific agency that is a mandated One-Stop partner. However, other public disability agencies such as MR/DD and MH agencies have the option of becoming partners or collaborators with the One-Stop system. Additionally, One-Stop Centers offer various levels of services to the consumer. The core services of the One-Stop are self-directed and open to all clients. The centers also provide two other types of services: training, and intensive services. These levels offer a guided approach to service and are only available to those individuals who meet specified eligibility requirements.

Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP).

Community rehabilitation providers are primarily local nonprofit or for-profit organizations that provide employment supports. They are principally funded by state agencies, and are considered to be contractors or vendors within that state agency. These may include, for example, Independent Living Centers that are run for and by people with disabilities. This CRP provides independent living supports and assistance with accessibility in the community, as well as employment supports.

Use of Terminology.

As the findings of this research are presented, the use of a particular state agency or community rehabilitation provider (CRP) will be clearly differentiated and the appropriate terminology will be used. In addition, it is important to note that different agencies use various types of language when referring to the people who use their services. Some agencies refer to these individuals as consumers, while others use the term clients, recipients, or customers. For the purpose of this research, we have chosen to refer to the study participants as consumers, job-seekers, and individuals with disabilities interchangeably.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative methodology to allow for a more detailed picture of participant experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Specifically, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with adults with disabilities who were successfully employed with the help of a state service system. This approach enabled the researchers to understand pertinent issues in service delivery and how consumers experienced the systems they used. The following section will address (a) the sample (b) data collection methods, and (c) data analysis.

Sample

Recruitment

The sample of individuals with disabilities was recruited through a variety of disability advocacy groups including Centers for Independent Living and the Massachusetts ARC. In addition, welfare advocacy organizations throughout the metro-Boston region were contacted

for assistance with recruitment of individuals with disabilities receiving TANF assistance. Agency personnel were asked to recruit potential participants using a packet of information and eligibility criteria provided to them by the research team. Once agency staff had recruited eligible participants, names and contact information were forward to the research team.

Description of Participants

Nineteen adults with disabilities were interviewed in total. These individuals represented a wide range of disability and racial and ethnic diversity. Please see Table 1 for detailed demographic information. It is important to note that several of the participants described themselves as having multiple disabilities and also used multiple systems; thus, the numbers do not add up to nineteen.

At the time of the interviews, only the two individuals receiving assistance from the welfare system were not working. The other seventeen participants were employed in a variety of positions ranging from supervisory and administration work to janitorial, kitchen work, and clerical work. Some had started working right out of high school, while others had advanced degrees. The job seekers were also at different stages in their careers. For example, one individual had extensive experience in a highly specialized field, which was in sharp contrast to another who had spent most of her adult years in a sheltered workshop and was in a competitively paid retail position in the community for the first time. Others had very limited employment histories with little to no job skills, especially those participants receiving TANF assistance.

The participants gained access to the various agencies in a myriad of ways. Some people entered the system through caseworkers at hospitals at the onset of their disability. Educational advisors or social service workers were another common source of referrals to the state agencies. Others came to use the agencies in a more self-directed manner, either searching out the services on their own or learning about the options through personal connections.

Table 1

Gender	
Male	9
Female	10
Age	
20-29	2
30-39	8
40-49	9
Racial/Ethnic Background	
African- American	6
Caucasian	10
Latino/Hispanic	1
Other	2
Level of Education	
None (institutionalized)	1
Some high school	3
High school degree	5
Some college	5
College degree	3
Masters Degree	2
Type of disability	
Physical	3
Mental Illness	9
Sensory Impairment	3
Cognitive	5
Learning	2
Agency Used	
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission	10
Department of Mental Retardation	3
Department of Mental Health	3
One-Stop Centers	7
Department of Transitional Assistance	2
Massachusetts Commission for the Blind	1

Data Collection

Screening for Eligibility

Each participant was asked to complete a demographic form. This form was used to compile individual profiles and also served as a screening tool (See Appendix A). Participants were screened for eligibility based on the following criteria: a) they were 21 years of age or older, b) they described themselves as having a disability, c) they were currently employed, and d) they found their most recent job through the assistance of any of the following state agencies: Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD), Mental Health (MH), or One-Stop Centers. Screening criteria for individuals receiving assistance from Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) were adapted slightly due to extreme recruitment difficulties. These participants had to have the same characteristics noted above, but could be currently seeking employment at the time of the interview. In addition, the researchers required that services were used in a variety of system office locations including urban, suburban, and rural and ensured statewide representation including northern, southern, western, and metropolitan regions throughout the state.

Interviewing

Once the referral was made from the recruitment source, the project staff then contacted each individual and explained the purpose of the research, acquired a signed consent form, and scheduled an interview. Interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, conducted in person, and lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Only in the event that a face to face meeting could not be arranged, interviews were conducted over the telephone at a pre-arranged time most convenient for the participant(s). Two phone interviews were conducted in total. A protocol of questions was constructed to guide the interview process found in Appendix B. However, interviewers encouraged open discussion, and in keeping with the qualitative framework did not strictly adhere to a specific set of questions or topics (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This allowed for a free flow of conversation to encourage a comprehensive collection of the interviewee's experience. Interview questions focused on individuals' perspectives on receiving support from state service systems. More specifically, participants were asked to expand upon their reasons for work, why/how they sought assistance from an agency, their experiences as recipients of agency support including helpful aspects and barriers, and a description of their current employment situation. Each participant was offered a stipend as a thank you for his/her time. All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the participant. Tapes were then sent to an independent agency to be transcribed.

Proxies

Proxies were used in two instances during this study. In both cases, the sample members were individuals with cognitive disabilities who had attempted the interview but were unable to participate because they had difficulty with the interview format. They were asked to nominate a collateral source (or proxy) to speak on their behalf (Ferraro, Orvetal & Plaud, 1998). Each participant was asked permission to contact the nominee. In both cases, the study

participant nominated a parent as a proxy, and researchers requested the consent of the parent to be interviewed. Proxies were instructed to answer protocol questions from the perspective of the individual with the cognitive impairment, rather than from their own point of view.

Data Analysis

After transcription, the researchers undertook analysis of data. QSR NUD*IST 4.0 for the Macintosh (1997) was used to facilitate conceptualization of themes, coding and sorting of data. This software was designed specifically to facilitate qualitative analysis, and had been used successfully on previous qualitative projects by these researchers. The specific data analysis techniques used by the researchers were coding and memo writing.

Coding

The analytic process by which a researcher begins organizing data into themes or categories related to both original and project-inspired research questions is known as “coding” (Strauss, 1987). These codes become meaningful labels that denote concepts, actions, or recurrent themes. Once data is coded, it allows the researcher to see relationships and context between pieces of data.

The authors developed codes by reading through transcripts and assessing for themselves appropriate labels and themes that occurred in the data. The authors then met as a group to assess the codes they had constructed, and create a master-list of codes and definitions. Consensus on coding was reached by having more than one author code a particular transcript, and then meeting to achieve reconciliation of codes. As new data was collected this process of conceiving and reconciling codes was repeated, and additional codes were added to the master-list as appropriate.

Memo Writing

Memos are systematic writing and musings of the researchers that occur during the coding process. Memos serve to focus the emerging themes and concepts into a discussion that emphasizes outcomes of research questions. Often memos are used to generate organizational schemes and further conceptualization or sorting of data analysis. While conducting their analysis, the researchers met on a regular basis to discuss the emerging data and the memos generated by this process.

The researchers were also careful to ensure consistency of data analysis by using the reconciliation and crosscheck method of independently coded data previously mentioned. The validity of the findings was confirmed by the participants themselves, as several were invited to confirm interpretations presented in any publishable product or summary of data analysis.

Findings

Analysis of comments from individuals defined five key components to agency services. These factors were used to measure effective delivery of employment supports and were identified as important to success and high satisfaction for the job seeker. These components included:

- ▶ agency culture
- ▶ consumer-directedness
- ▶ access to resources
- ▶ quality personnel
- ▶ coordinated services

Following a discussion of each of the five components to effective service delivery, job seekers noted several obstacles both within and outside of their experience with the system that affected their job search efforts. In order to counteract many of the barriers and maximize their experience with the agency(s) they used, study participants utilized a set of personal strategies. These personal strategies decreased job seeker frustration while positively impacting their job search experience. Each of the five components, as well as the obstacles and personal strategies, will be described through the words and perspectives of the job seekers.

Five Key Components to Service Delivery

A two-fold description of each of the components to effective service delivery will be described. Participants explained why these components are crucial to effective service delivery, and how the experience is positive for the job seeker when they are present. Conversely, study participants also noted the negative consequences when components were absent, as well as the detrimental effect this had on their experience with the agency during the job search process.

Agency Culture

One factor that influenced the individuals' perceptions and satisfaction of state agencies was the culture. Agency culture was defined as both the social and physical environment of the agency or CRP encountered by the participant either on the first visit or at any time thereafter.

Social Environment.

The quality of the social environment in the agencies was apparent almost immediately to the consumers. The social environment was defined by the consumers' feelings of belonging, their comfort with staff and other consumers, and their ability to work with staff to have a good experience accessing appropriate services. Participants talked about the attitude of staff, their reactions to questions or concerns, the extent to which they felt welcomed, and whether or not they were greeted warmly upon entry.

Some participants expressed initial uncertainty about the personnel's knowledge of job openings or their interest in providing valuable help to them. One particularly anxious participant who had utilized the VR system had been forewarned to pay attention to whether

her counselor was “a good counselor,” someone who would listen to her concerns and take her work interests into account. Participants described good counselors as fostering a comfortable social environment, working with the participants as individuals, and dispelling their uneasiness. Although one consumer went as far as describing the people at the agency as “almost like a close family,” it was important for consumers to at least feel that the social environment was conducive to learning job skills and accomplishing other job-search objectives. The participant who had been warned to be cautious about the counselors commented that her own view would be very different if she were advising others about the agency: “If I were to tell anybody about Mass. Rehab. [a nickname for the Massachusetts VR system] that’s what I would tell them, that they shouldn’t have anything to fear when you walk in the door.”

Another participant described his expectation of the social environment at the One-Stop he used. He expected “that you filled in the application and you went up and sat at somebody’s desk and they sort of looked sternly over their glasses and said ‘I don’t think we have anything for you today’.” To his surprise, he discovered a “friendly and open-minded environment” in which he became comfortable quickly. The level of interest the staff took in him as an individual job-seeker, a quality emphasized by other satisfied study participants, helped him to understand that the One-Stop was a place he could use fully. This impression led him to take advantage of workshops, networking opportunities, technical assistance, and other resources that served to speed up his job search.

However, not all impressions of the agencies’ social environments were favorable ones. A study participant described her initial impression of the welfare system as not welcoming because she felt that no one seemed genuinely concerned or interested. She described being in a group of other job-seekers as they were oriented to the services by the agency. The staff spoke with them as a group about job skills and resources and proceeded to place them quickly into possible jobs. All of this happened rapidly, giving her little time to explain her need for more training and education: “It wasn’t like they were really helping me. The only thing they were just thinking about was me getting a job.” Another individual discussed his experience in the VR system: “The specialist I worked with was far too encumbered with a caseload to give me the kind of attention I felt I needed.” This participant went on to explain his point of view:

Not all people who sit behind a vocational rehabilitation desk who are supposedly interested in getting you back to work are appropriately seated there...it’s not only that they need to develop personal skills, it is that they need to belong to those personal skills.

Another consumer using One-Stop services explained that she never truly found out the range of services this system offered because of an uncomfortable social environment:

People weren’t so welcoming like “here, let us help you with your job search.” It’s basically like you almost had to know what you were looking for before you went in there. So that was my impression. And I guess I just continued to have that impression too. But with the resume bank, that was the only thing I really asked for assistance with from the staff and it was a bust. I really didn’t get any help from them.

Physical Environment.

The physical environment was discussed by participants as it related primarily to accessibility of not only the space itself, but also the availability of computers and other equipment that was either user-friendly or easily adapted with the appropriate accommodations.

In general, consumers' comments suggested that the physical environment of the agencies was mostly accommodating and accessible. The buildings tended to be physically accessible to wheelchair users, with enough ramps and elevators installed to allow for freedom of movement. In this respect, there were no reported differences in physical accessibility between generic and disability-specific agencies. Besides the larger-scale efforts at creating more accessible spaces, some agencies added smaller touches to the physical environment that consumers often noticed. One participant talked about a sign that delivered a welcoming and encouraging message that helped to put her at ease, and gave her a sense of the VR agency as an accessible, helpful place: "I entered a waiting room and right on the wall there's a sign that says 'if you are a person with a disability and want to work, we will help you.' So it's like you knew if you went in there that they would help you try to find employment."

Some participants' first impressions of One-Stops were colored by their apprehension of using computers or other equipment, although as long as accommodations were made, they remained satisfied. Technological accommodations were mentioned by several participants, mostly by those who were visually impaired. Discussion about difficulty meeting those needs arose most often in reference to One-Stop Centers. However, these agencies seemed willing to accommodate individuals as much as possible, at least by providing assistance with inaccessible materials. One participant with a visual impairment was very pleased with this form of help in using the Internet, commenting that it was "helpful to have someone being my eyes at the terminal looking for websites." He also appreciated the One-Stop staff's willingness to help him with particularly challenging steps in the job-search, such as editing his resume: "The visual aspect does make a lot of difference, so it's good to have somebody [editing it] and that's really why I can say strongly that I appreciate the [agency staff]...I can do those editing things on my own but I like a little window dressing too because I know it's important." Other technological accommodations that were mentioned included various operating styles for the computers—the use of a touch screen on one machine and a keyboard on another—that simplified their use.

Consumer Directedness

Participants defined consumer-directedness as the provision of three main ingredients by the agency. First, the individual must have opportunities for active involvement throughout the job search process. Second, the individual must have his or her own choice-making ability, and third, the agency needs to provide individualized services based on the unique needs of the job seeker.

Active Involvement.

Having the opportunity to feel actively involved in the job search was important to individuals in the study. One consumer expressed appreciation for the involvement she had in her job

search at the vocational rehabilitation agency she used: “I felt like I was involved in the process in a lot of ways. I wasn’t disconnected from the process. I was part of it, which is what you need to be in order to keep going.”

Not surprisingly, individuals were dissatisfied when they felt uninvolved in the process, whether it was throughout the job search or after they found employment. One consumer discussed her lack of involvement in problems that needed to be sorted out with an employer, when the employer dealt directly with her job coach:

As soon as [the job coach] came into the picture it seemed like they didn’t listen to me anymore, they talked to her and not me. That bothered me ‘cause I am never going to learn to take constructive criticism...they would talk to the job coach and not me again. No one would ever talk to me, they would always talk to the person I worked with.

The same individual talked about her feelings of being excluded from meetings about her workplace performance, indicating “ I always wondered why I couldn’t go in, especially since it was about me.”

Some of the negative aspects of a lack of involvement in the job search were pointed out. One participant noted the disadvantages of her counselor’s over-involvement in the job search process. For example, when responding to a job notice, her counselor would send out her resume, rather than encouraging the job seeker to do these tasks herself. As a result, this job seeker felt that she was less likely to learn job search tasks on her own. She says, “I think that sometimes when you are not as involved in the process, in the event that something happens and your counselor is not there, then you have to try to get the rustiness out of your brains and say okay now I need a cover letter.” In this situation, the individual was not able to develop the necessary skills for a successful job search.

Choice.

Choice was also a central component of consumer-directedness. As one consumer stated, “they gave me the choice of what I want to do.” Participants were satisfied when they were offered many choices throughout the job search and placement process. In addition, when options were consistently offered, individuals felt positive about their ability to decide what was most appropriate for their own unique situation. Choices were given about job search strategies to utilize, about the path participants could take to reach their employment aspirations, and about the best career match based on skills and interests. One individual explained, “I don’t feel like anybody was directing me or corralling me into looking in one direction.”

In order for the individual to exercise choice, a range of options needed to be consistently presented throughout. A consumer-directed agency offered consumers the ability to learn about various careers and make their own decisions about job goals by exposing them to a wide variety of employment opportunities. Agency personnel listened to consumers and considered consumer preferences when decisions were made. Satisfied participants also felt a

sense of control over the services they requested and received. For example, one individual discussed how the agency she used was “not forcing me to do anything, only things I want to do and they just guide me to do it.”

Another study participant noted how choices about the range of job options encouraged him to explore his career aspirations:

They were trying to expose me to all different kinds of opportunities. By that I mean...when they had people to come to talk about jobs and what they have there, they did not tell me “it’s only for retailers don’t go.” They just said “go in,” and although it may not be of interest to me it was fun to hear. . . I think they were just helping to expose me to everything. If it changes your mind to anything that’s fine..

Provision of Individualized Services.

Individualized services were defined as those that were tailored to the unique needs of each individual, or the matching of job options with interests and abilities. One example of individualized services occurred when a consumer was able to move more quickly through her assessment process at the VR system since she had been previously involved with that agency: “They were helpful in that they sped things up for me. It wasn’t a case where I had to go through what I had gone through originally when I had to apply before.” However, if these services are not specialized for the individual, consumers may waste time receiving unneeded resources. One participant explained: “I felt like they were taking me from the beginning as though they had a curriculum and that was their means of getting to know a person rather than...understanding what you had done and saying ‘let’s brush up on the things you need to know and get you some interviews.’” Another participant noted that although she attended a job club resource, there were few job listings in her field. She said, “therefore, when they would give you packets of jobs from your resume, they weren’t pertaining to me at all.”

Central to the provision of individualized services is learning about the consumer’s goals and interests and then providing the best services to meet their needs. Therefore, participants felt that a proper assessment was key in order to provide individualized services. One participant noted that it is important “to assess the person really closely to see if they would be able to do the job they want.” Another consumer who had used a mental health agency thought that his assessment was helpful in targeting the job search: “They want to know what kind of job you really want to do so they can focus on that, where to look.” Still another individual described her counselor’s ability to determine her true career choices:

Nobody ever touched base on my being an artist all my life...[The counselor] touched base on it very quickly. As soon as I told her I had been doing it for that long, she made the call right away and we made interviews...Right away I knew it was going to be exciting for me.

Assessment procedures that consumers felt satisfied with included an extensive testing of skills and interests in order to determine feasible jobs as well as possibilities for further education or

job training. Often assessments were comprised of in-depth interviews discussing careers of interest or skills that the consumer would like to improve upon in order to secure employment. These detailed assessments uncovered valuable information about the consumer that could lead to an ideal job placement. Indeed, successful job placement seemed to occur when the services were geared not just towards finding a new job, but to finding a better fit.

Consumers who were not properly assessed for their skills and interests were often placed in jobs that did not interest them or for which they were unqualified; thus, individualized service provision did not occur. Agencies that did not ask about career goals and aspirations also tended to limit the career possibilities of individuals. One participant was discouraged from pursuing a more advanced career opportunity because the agency did not believe that she could perform at this level. Although assessments are not a required part of One-Stop services, one job seeker using this agency explained that she would have liked more of an assessment process: “just something so that they would get an idea of what you were looking for and if they have those resources or services available that they could just make the connection for you.”

Inappropriate or non-existent assessment often extended to inappropriate or undesired services, or placement into jobs that did not match individual skills or interests. One consumer was dissatisfied when the VR agency did not seem to be looking for jobs in fields that suited her interests, so that the only employment options she was given were inappropriate. Another consumer had always been placed by the MR/DD agency she was using into the same type of work (cafeteria work), even though she had expressed an interest in doing office jobs. Still another participant commented that although the VR agency was making an effort to guide people toward employment, there seemed to be channeling toward particular types of work, whether or not that was the preference of the consumer. He noted that the agency seemed “more interested in placement than career choice.”

In particular, some individuals who utilized generic systems found that they weren't able to obtain the individualized services that they needed to meet the unique needs of their disabilities. One participant believed that these generic agencies

should be working with the other agencies or be aware of the fact that there is a disability there. And then to accommodate that disability or understand why a person is there or what's going on. I don't think they quite are aware of it, they are just a very one-size-fits-all type of thing over there, which I think is not always good because one-size-fits-all doesn't always work.

She went on to explain that “sometimes people with disabilities need more help...because to the varying degree of our disability we have to be considered different.”

Access to Resources

Access to agency resources was an important factor in participants' satisfaction with the service system experience. Resources ranged from job listings, training opportunities, technical

resources, and post-placement support, to physical accommodations such as transportation and technical supports. Participants described a wide range of resources that they used throughout the service delivery process. Many consumers received assistance in job-seeking skills such as writing their resumes, participating in mock interviews, and attending job fairs. One individual said, “I did a mock interview over there which was very good. One other thing I got that was very positive at Mass. Rehab...I was told how best to dress for an interview, how to dress, how to present myself and so forth.” Others participated in computer training, employment-skills workshops, or job clubs. When asked about helpful resources that the system offered, this job-seeker responded:

Doing call backs, when you should call back, follow up thank you letters, that type of thing. The other positive thing they have was they have a group where you could go in and look in the newspapers...a job club where you could go in and go through the newspapers, photostat the job leads you would find and give them to your counselor and they would follow through.

The majority of the participants, especially the more self-directed individuals, found the job listing resources to be extremely helpful. When asked about the most favorable part about the system’s services during the job search, this job seeker described the following:

As I said before it was the access to the resources. To have the job listings even though I didn’t see all that many job listings that I thought were appropriate for me in the notebooks there. It was just helpful just to feel like you are making progress in your job search. Okay I can go there, they update these things once a week. I can go once a week and look at job listings. You never know, maybe something will turn up or it may be the same old ones. So having the job listings and having the access to the computers.

Individuals who used One-Stop Centers found this to be one of the most important resources the agency provided, as well as the access to technology such as computers and fax machines. Other consumers received more physical accommodations from the service system to meet the needs of their disabilities including adaptive software.

While individuals were pleased when they obtained needed resources, some of the participants expressed discontent when agencies failed to provide appropriate resources. Several people mentioned the agency’s lack of accommodations in meeting the needs of their disability. Most often, this referred to issues of transportation. One parent of an individual using the MR/DD system described her dissatisfaction with the agency’s transportation resource: “The agency says that they are providing that service to us, but they’re not. I’m the one who takes her to work and all other appointments.” Another participant was disappointed with the slow provision of technological accommodations by the agency for the blind that he was using.

Participants were equally disappointed when an abundance of resources appeared to exist at the agency, but they were unaware of how to clearly find a route to access them. One job seeker who used a One-Stop Center described this dilemma in the following way. She began

by acknowledging the multitude of available job search resources:

For me the best thing about the One-Stop Centers was...having some place to go every time I wanted to write a cover letter. Just to know I could go there and have a couple of hours on a computer and in the same place I could fax something out to an employer, print out an extra copy of a resume so for me that was the biggest help...

However, when thinking more about these resources, she notes that “basically you have to make the decision to do whatever you are going to. It was basically ‘we will give you some tools and you have to find your own way through,’ which I think doesn’t help.” When asked for a recommendation in solving this problem, she indicated the following response:

Well for me it would have been helpful if I would have even had a 15 minute briefing one-on-one with somebody...it seemed like you had to make an appointment with someone for a specific reason either to build your resume or to handle a particular issue but you didn’t necessarily just get to meet with somebody because you weren’t clear about what you were doing, where you were going, or the best way to handle the job search...and ask [about] the types of services that might be helpful to you or what you needed help with...

Quality Personnel

Another important factor of service delivery was the quality of the personnel. Study participants described high quality personnel as those who demonstrated reliability and consistency, and provided emotional support throughout the job search process. Conversely, when personnel did not demonstrate these characteristics, participants described their counselor interactions as unsatisfactory.

Reliability and Consistency.

Individuals expressed satisfaction when their counselors had always been available and would continue to be available whenever the consumer needed anything: “The good thing is that the counselors are there for you if you need them.” Study participants described reliable counselors as those who went beyond what was expected of them: “[my counselor] has gone above and beyond what she needed to do. Off hours she would call me from her home.” These counselors offered the consumers unconditional support in the provision of concrete services. This meant they would assist the job seeker in any way they could, including helping with resumes, cover letters, mock interviews, presentation skills, and showing the consumer how to use resources such as the internet, newspapers, and job clubs. They were also available to go on interviews, or go to job fairs with their consumers. They helped job seekers to deal proactively with problems that presented themselves during the job search or on-the-job and were willing to stick with situations until acceptable solutions were determined.

Satisfied consumers also noted a sense of consistency among their caseworkers, depicted by ongoing, regular contact throughout the process in the form of routine checking in, not just when there was a problem or crisis. The ideal counselor maintained consistent communication

in the form of updates on job openings or any feedback or advice s/he had received from employers. This contact was maintained not just during the job search and job placement processes but post-placement too. The ongoing contact allowed solid job seeker/counselor relationships to develop.

Post-placement support was also clearly valued by study participants. They explained that post-placement support created consistency that was maintained throughout the entire process and that the support did not end at placement. Study participants acknowledged the counselors who recognized the value of post-placement support. At times, the counselors themselves would remain involved to help individuals transition to the job. Or, the counselor would follow up with the assistance of a job coach to help with on-the-job problems. Either way, receiving guidance while on-the-job taught the new employee problem solving techniques, organization of various work activities, and how to cope with interpersonal problems. As one participant noted, “we will sit down and talk and discuss things, what I see going on and how can I organize myself.” Another participant described the proactive nature of the job coach relationship: “Cause now I have a job counselor...we take care of what the problem was that caused me to lose my job in the first place.”

Provision of Emotional Support.

Many of the participants reported relying on their counselors primarily for emotional support. This much-needed emotional support was considered crucial to individuals in order to survive frustrations encountered during the job search and employment process. Job seekers also mentioned feeling weary and frustrated by what seemed like endless job searches and found that the counselors who offered emotional support in the form of caring words and encouragement were most helpful. One job seeker expressed the importance of emotional support in this way:

I have this counselor, she was there for me the times I was frustrated with the job search and was upset about it, she was there for the support to get me through it. Cause if I didn't have that support I don't know where I would have been...cause there were times I was extremely frustrated. Cause I wasn't getting jobs. I was getting interviews and sending out resumes and going places and doing what I was supposed to do and it just wasn't coming through.

Counselors that provided emotional support also tried to boost job-seeker confidence and provided motivation to the job seeker during low points in the job search. One study participant indicated, “They gave me a lot of support...compliments and motivation just to help me out. I just liked the way they handled things.” Another said of her counselor, “She gave me a lot of confidence. She gave me extra boost so I can feel comfortable at the next job I go to.” Still another explained, “[I] desperately needed someone to hold my hand and get me through it and that's what happened, [my counselor] did it and now I can get through the rest of it pretty much with more confidence.”

Counselors that were able to provide emotional support and encouragement while teaching hands-on job search techniques at the same time were highly regarded by their consumers:

The great thing about it was my counselor and I had gone on a really big interview...and I was really nervous because the [workplace] has a really fantastic reputation so she met me in the parking lot...that day and we sat and talked and went through some things, kind of a mock interview in the parking lot and went and got coffee. [We] came back and I did the interview. Now unfortunately I didn't get the job but at least I had the support which she gave me.

Conversely, when job seekers were not connected to a specific counselor who could provide support and an ear to listen, they were less satisfied with the experience. One individual described how the biggest disadvantage of the One-Stop Center was that individuals aren't assigned a specific counselor to work with: "I think the biggest problem with [the system] is not being able to have a counselor to talk to. [It's] tough because you really don't have one person that you can be in connection with and say 'look, I'm having trouble finding a job.'" Another consumer explained that the One-Stop "probably would have been a good resource for me except for the fact that you don't have a counselor to see constantly which is what you really do need."

Coordinated Services

Many of the participants were using more than one service system to assist them in obtaining employment. Individuals either accessed these multiple systems through their own initiative or were referred to other agencies by another service system. When multiple systems were used, good service coordination was an important factor for successful experiences. Individuals were highly satisfied with multiple supports that were collaborative and joined forces in order to meet the needs of the consumer. One participant provided an example of how coordinated and truly individualized service between the VR system and the community rehabilitation provider were best used to meet her needs:

At one point in time when we were having such a difficult time trying to figure out why I wasn't getting called back for second interviews and being hired, we had my MRC counselor, my JVS counselor, and myself sitting together bouncing things off each other to see what we could do and where we could go. So we were constantly working together.

Another example of coordinated services occurred when one participant who had recently relocated from out of state was able to work with VR agencies from both states to receive appropriate services.

Consumers were pleased when they were referred between agencies in order to obtain the best services. For example, one individual was sent from one One-Stop Center to another in order to work with a specialist who had experience in dealing with individuals with his type of disability. In addition, consumers were most satisfied when their combination of service

delivery systems were in contact. One participant described the good communication between the VR agency and the community rehabilitation provider he was working with. He explained that they had “responsibility for each other as well as myself.”

The majority of the participants who utilized multiple service systems were pleased with the results. The individuals who were most successful in their job search understood the strengths of each agency and were able to use each one to meet their specific needs. For instance, one consumer took advantage of the training opportunities offered by a One-Stop Center while receiving job-finding services from a community rehabilitation provider. Another participant got technological needs met through Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, while a One-Stop provided additional job search resources:

I think that Mass. Commission did something good in the way that they provided me with all the technology necessary. They bought equipment for me meaning software to adapt [a] computer... They gave me all the Braille papers and Braille machines...and all that stuff that a blind person needs in order to be functional for the job. So in that way they did provide me those things. Also they paid for me to go [to the One-Stop Center] and...they helped me to find other resources to seek for a job..I went every week to search there...I tried to arrange for interviews and be prepared so they helped me in that way.

The only negative aspect of using multiple agencies was the occasion of overlapping services. Several participants mentioned that they were receiving the same services from a few different agencies, and expressed that this was not the most productive or efficient manner to conduct the job search process.

They have a job club and so forth but the only problem I found with the services was the internet services were good for me but I didn't need a lot of help with the resume stuff cause I had the resume stuff. I didn't need all those resources cause Jewish Vocational Service was doing those resources for me so I didn't really need it. It was like a carry over.

Obstacles

While searching for employment, individuals faced many obstacles both within and outside of their experience with the service system. Such barriers noted by participants were:

- ▶ Discrimination/fear of disclosure
- ▶ Double bind of having to disclose a hidden disability in order to obtain support
- ▶ Inadequate transportation options
- ▶ Inaccessible workplaces that limited potential job options
- ▶ Concerns about problematic employment histories

Discrimination/Fear of Disclosure

Individuals in the study reported encountering discrimination and a lack of disability awareness during their search for employment. This lack of understanding complicated the job search, and created uncomfortable feelings about disclosure throughout the interview and job finding process.

The job seekers' hesitancy to disclose their disabilities became clear in the interviews. One participant said "I am not going to put on my resume that I need an environment that is going to not be so triggering for post traumatic stress disorder or depression or whatever." Another avoided letting others know of his disability by saying "most of the time you just don't want to be categorized or classified as having a disability. You don't want to...call attention to your disability." Yet another participant with a visible disability discussed the shock he could sense that people had when interviewing him, and he was ill at ease with the way potential employers treated him. He said, "It's remarkable to me that people are still so insular about the whole disability environment starting to kind of make its way into the regular workforce."

He went on to describe the experience of interviewing for a job in this way:

The receptionist had no idea what to do with me. [She] had no idea that they didn't have to steer me to a seat, that I could go there by myself. When I first walked in the door I was met by a very professional person who was my original contact, shook my hand affably, spoke congenially and effectively, took me in to meet her boss...he was like immediately shocked to see that a person who was blind could be actually coming in to look at this job. The impression I got when I shook his hand was like "oh oh we knew this was going to happen, that somebody would eventually confront us on this. What are we going to do about it?" I could tell that that was the effect because 20 minutes later when the atmosphere was relaxed and we started talking jowl to cheek about just what was expected from the job, I felt him relax from across the room.

The Double Bind

Several participants mentioned they were caught in what the researchers labeled a "double bind". On the one hand they did not want to call attention to their disabilities due to the associated stigma. Yet on the other hand, if they did not disclose their disability they were unable to get assistance they needed. One participant with a psychiatric disability found it difficult to ask for help at a generic agency because of the potential for discrimination and calling attention to something that was otherwise "hidden." She states:

Again with my particular mental health issues too, it sort of limits my ability to get people on board, somebody that didn't have the limitations might be better at asking for help...I didn't make it known. If I had gone in there with a visual impairment for example and had used a walking stick or a dog or something, it would have been obvious that I would maybe need some assistance or want some assistance, but with a mental health issue it's not visible.

Another described a "double bind" she was faced with when using a One-Stop for assistance. She was conflicted about disclosing her needs related to her disability because of the perceived stereotypes, yet she realized that she probably wouldn't receive the best services as a result. She says, "I don't know how good the matching system could be given that they don't get to know who you are and what you are looking for." As a result of not disclosing her unique needs, she felt that any potential service provider or employer would not get a true picture of her.

Inadequate Transportation

One of the key barriers to obtaining employment was transportation. Many of the participants were not automobile owners and faced challenges when it came to finding a bus route or having to deal with a long commute. As one individual noted, “most of the jobs now are all outside the greater Boston area...I have been accepted for 9 or 10 jobs [but] it’s a little bit too far for me to go...there’s not a bus run, I don’t have a car now so everything has to be on the MBTA bus route.” Study participants also mentioned that a widely used disability transportation service was often undependable with many cancellations. Furthermore, many times in the event of cancellations there were no back-up services to speak of, making interviewing a far greater task than it should have been.

Workplace Inaccessibility

Another barrier cited was the inconsistent nature of accessibility at the workplace. Encountering workplace inaccessibility often limited potential job options or perhaps even eliminated a job opportunity that was otherwise acceptable. For example, in the case of the following study participant who used a wheelchair, although several jobs were appealing to her, issues such as older buildings without elevators and unsafe ramps caused her to turn jobs down:

I had to turn some jobs down because the offices weren’t accessible. Like one job that sounded really good but the building was so old they didn’t even have elevators so I had to turn that down...At one other interview...I asked her [if they are] accessible and she said no but we do have a ramp...So this particular job interview...they had the ramp up on the steps but the two guys that put the ramp up on the step told her that I don’t think this is going to work. He said the ramp was too steep so when I go up the ramp I was scared I was going to tip back so she interviewed me outside... And [this job] was right up my alley, three days a week, 9-1 and I could take the bus, get off, be there and that would have been great. So I couldn’t take that job because basically it wasn’t accessible at all and the ramp didn’t work.

Concerns about Problematic Employment Histories

Individuals in the study reported concerns about having employment histories that were erratic and interrupted. They vocalized these concerns as part of their most recent job search because of the stress and pressure it had caused them in the past, and the anxiety it created as they presented themselves in new employment situations. Participants described being let go because of absences, lack of accommodations, or stress and pressure on the job that triggered a flare-up of one’s disability. Because of such factors related to their disability, individuals described problems related to job performance and either felt forced to quit or were terminated: “I had a lot of anxieties going to work and I would either quit a job or be fired from a position because of my disability. And it was a long time that that was happening for many years.” Another participant said the following: “Well the reason why I started to look for work was because I had lost my job of 6 years to my disability. There was a lot of hassle because they weren’t giving me the accommodations I needed so it ended up through the

stress and pressure of the job and everything else that happened I got fired.” Participants found it difficult to present their work histories to potential employers fearing that they would be viewed negatively or perceived to have a lack of stability. Job seekers weren’t always confident that prospective employers would fully understand the complex set of issues that they face in their search for meaningful employment.

The Development of Personal Strategies

The participants revealed a unique set of personal strategies that they had developed to help decrease frustration and overcome obstacles while positively impacting their job search. These strategies included:

- ▶ Using personal job search strategies
- ▶ Having a willingness to explore new opportunities
- ▶ Taking control of their own job search
- ▶ Adjusting service delivery to meet their needs

Using Personal Job Search Strategies

Many of the individuals went over and above the basic job finding services that the agency offered during the job search. Findings showed that many consumers relied on informal supports for job searching, conducted independent searches, or used a combination of service systems and their own personal strategies to find success.

Several of the individuals described using the resources and connections of family members or friends in their job search. One participant utilized the connection of a friend while regularly attending a weekly job club through an agency to look for positions in newspapers and on the internet. Another discussed the reliance on his wife who would assist him in following up with job listings in the newspapers.

Other participants talked about job searching independently. As one indicated, “I did a lot of my own research.” Often this personal search was conducted in addition to accessing the services that state systems offered. Another individual looked for a job on his own before using a One-Stop to move on to a better job. “At first I just walked around to get a job. I was just looking around the neighborhood...I just walked in and filled out an application and that’s how I got to work at Stop and Shop.” He also took advantage of services provided at the agency to look for his own jobs. “I look through the newspaper and employment guide and sometimes go on the internet and look for jobs.” Another participant had independently searched through the Help Wanted section of the Boston Globe and while doing so, became aware of the One-Stop Center in her area. This participant used her previous job search experience and skills when she accessed the system. She said,

I first started going there because I knew they had computers and fax machines and everything you would need to do a professional job search, but then I used other resources too like the job notebooks and the resume bank and stuff like that.

An additional example of using outside sources for job leads can be seen in the following quote:

There are different organizations that I know have job listings sort of in my field or jobs that would be of interest to me, so I would periodically go to those organizations, but not for services, just really to look at the job listings and photocopy things or whatever.

Still another group of participants combined the services of several systems. One individual in particular used both Vocational Rehabilitation and a One-Stop Center to speed up the job search process. He took advantage of the different connections that each agency had to offer in order to receive the best services and meet his needs throughout the process. He also took the initiative to make phone calls to companies and checked the newspapers on his own. Another participant began his job search by developing local contacts and supplemented the services of the agencies with his own job search, as he states: “In the meantime I was conducting a search of my own and taking some individual initiative.” He sent out hundreds of resumes and sat in on many interviews. He found appropriate places to advertise his services, by hanging up flyers and passing out business cards. He took advantage of workshops offered by the agencies, and found those to be very helpful. He also explored the use of head hunters and even utilized the personal connections of the personnel in the agencies to help find positions.

A Willingness to Explore

Many individuals in the study had a strong willingness to explore new learning opportunities. They remained open to new ideas and demonstrated flexibility in their pursuit of satisfying employment. They kept busy, they often worked in jobs they didn't love while looking for others, and they showed a willingness to try different options. Although their work histories were sometimes problematic, and they had faced many barriers throughout their lives, these individuals were always actively searching, working temporary jobs, volunteering, and doing whatever it took to increase their likelihood for successful and satisfying employment in the long run:

The first volunteer job I had was in Boston and I still volunteer for them. Then I volunteered for adult literacy and I stopped working for them and then I volunteered for the Jimmy Fund, part of Dana Farber. I worked there for 2 months and they found out I was looking for a job, they asked me what I wanted.

The willingness and eagerness to explore was motivated by the desire to learn new skills. For some, this motivation to learn was often expressed as the need to extend oneself or offer challenges to stimulate thinking, and also to seek out more educational and training opportunities. Others realized that they needed more skills and displayed an eagerness to learn more in areas that they were not knowledgeable. This sometimes meant a formal training program, volunteering or getting more education in some way. For one participant, the willingness to learn new computer skills and the enrollment into a training course actually led

to employment. As he says, “my goal was to just get a skill and I ended up in a job at the same time...”. Another individual described it in this way,

I decided I wanted to go to computer classes and take computers and I got hooked up with another workshop and in that workshop they had a program called Business Application so I got into that. You did computers, filing, answering phones and I knew that already. So I liked that and was there for a while, almost 2 years and in the meantime looked for jobs, had interviews. It worked out that I volunteered and that's how I got this job.

Taking Control of the Job Search

An extension of this willingness to learn is the self-motivation and self-directed nature of the job seekers themselves. The successful individuals felt that they had to help themselves, as one participant noted, “it was up to you to help yourself,” and not entirely depend on the services from state systems. Another user of a One-Stop Center expressed it this way: “It was really up to me because like I said, I didn't have any staff specifically assisting me with the job search so it was basically up to my own creativity.” These individuals felt it was important to take control of their own job searches, and to avoid sitting back and waiting for someone else to do their work for them. Taking control of one's own job search also meant directing the process of job finding in collaboration with the system. One individual who used a One-Stop Center noted the way in which she controlled her own job search: “I just used the staff at the program I was in just to make sure I was staying on track with the job search, sort of had to set goals with what I was trying to do with the job search on a weekly basis.” Another expressed this sentiment while giving advice to future job seekers: “Go to all the job clubs and do a lot more work on your own because you can't just rely on Mass Rehab to do it anyway. You have to do some stuff on your own.” Yet another individual described his sense of control in this way:

Using the system I believe that my only concern is not to let everything be taken care of for you. You use the system and you have to be out there yourself and also have to be able to change if necessary...You gotta go yourself and look for a job. Maybe what you find is better than what [the system] find[s] for you. You have to be able as I said before to say “let me try something else,” to challenge yourself. That is another thing, everybody has to challenge themselves...If you have no ambition you have nothing...I did not want to sit home and have someone dictate what I did for a job.

Adjusting Service Delivery to Meet Needs

The study participants encountered distinct differences in the agencies' overall approach to providing help. Participants who sought help from VR, MR/DD, DMH and other disability-related agencies experienced a more guided approach to service delivery. With this approach, consumers tended to be assigned counselors who would work one-on-one with them through the entire job-search process, from the initial orientation/assessment meetings at the beginning, throughout the search, until they were placed in jobs and were receiving post-placement

support. Consumers who received core services from One-Stop Centers were helped in a more self-directed manner. They were quickly oriented to the centers by staff members, received a short appointment with a counselor, and were presented with an array of workshops, library resources and opportunities to meet employers and network with other consumers. Their time at the One-Stop was their own to plan, with minimal direction.

The guided and self-directed approaches encountered by the participants existed on either end of a continuum of services provided by the various state agencies, with each agency's approach to service delivery classified as closer to one end or the other. Our findings indicate that although these two types of approaches to service delivery were available, it was the participants who tailored the services to fit their needs. This tailoring is done through the skills, background, and personal characteristics that each consumer brings to the job search. For instance, consumers with a clear idea about the type of job they are looking for could likely utilize the core services of a One-Stop more effectively than job seekers without clear goals. At the disability-related agencies, participants could create more opportunities for self-direction by communicating with staff about their goals and needs in order to influence the approach of the counselor during the job search. Conversely, customers could increase the level of guidance in the One-Stop by consulting counselors more frequently and attending more workshops. This continuum illustrates that each consumer was able to utilize aspects of the two distinct approaches to service delivery—self-directed and guided—in order to experience a form of help that best met their needs in the search for employment.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study reveal the experiences of individuals as consumers of employment support from state service systems. Study participants described their experiences with state systems through identification of five key components to effective service delivery. Individuals were satisfied when they received services from agencies that provided a comfortable physical and social environment, used a consumer-directed service delivery model, provided easy access to resources, had quality personnel, and encouraged good service coordination. The presence of a combination of these features increased the likelihood that the participants were satisfied with the services they received as they secured successful employment outcomes. Individuals also identified both the barriers encountered throughout the job search and the personal strategies they developed to overcome some of the obstacles while adding to, and at times, enhancing the formal supports delivered by the state system.

The ultimate goal of both the job seeker and the system is for the consumer to have a successful outcome from his or her experience and interaction with the state system. Success can be defined as obtaining satisfying employment from the perspective of the job seeker, one that meets preferences and serves as a step along a charted career path. Success also means building the job-seeker's competence to search for work again in the future and to manage his or her own career decisions and career paths over time. With this shared goal in mind for both

the job seeker and the state service system, the following discussion section will explore what job seekers and state systems can do to maximize their experience together.

Recommendations on what both parties can do independently to achieve success and what job seekers and systems can do collaboratively to achieve success are offered.

Ways to Build Job Seeker Competence

Build Social Supports

Findings from this study show that in addition to the services offered by the system, the development of personal strategies used by successful job finders was crucial to success. In particular, successful individuals used informal supports such as family members in addition to the job finding support offered by systems. Other researchers have found that the use of informal supports or social networks such as family, friends, co-workers and neighbors are instrumental in locating a job (Timmons, Schuster & Moloney, 2001). Training strategies such as those found in the “Building Community Connections” curriculum developed by Gandolfo, Gold, Hunt, Marrone, and Whelan (1996) help individuals access a broad network for job development. The underlying premise is that the strategic use of social and community networks opens up a crucial support vital to getting and retaining a good job. Previous research on this employment strategy showed that individuals who used a networking approach found jobs with better pay and more hours, and that the job search took less time (Temelini & Fesko, 1996).

Recommendations:

- ▶ Facilitate the development of job seekers’ personal support systems and networking skills by supporting individuals’ close personal relationships, mapping out their personal resources, and helping to develop action plans for job finding and follow-up.
- ▶ Link individuals with mentorship opportunities and peer supports.
- ▶ Generic services such as One-Stop Centers and the welfare system should improve connections with disability service systems and disability advocacy groups in order to improve the range of supports available to individuals seeking employment.
- ▶ Become familiar with person-centered planning processes such as Personal Futures Planning, PATH, or Whole Life Planning (Butterworth, et.al, 1993) that encourage the individual to call upon his or her network to assist in developing goals and implementing a plan for achieving them. While person-centered planning focuses on the preferences, talents and dreams of the focal person, there is an emphasis on the identification and development of relationships with significant others who actively contribute and participate in the process.

Address Interrupted Work Histories

All of the study participants experienced either chronically unsteady employment or steady employment only prior to the onset or acquiring of a disability. Employment histories were highly changeable and irregular, with a lot of fluctuation between jobs. Temporary gaps between jobs were also evident. As the barriers section illustrates, much of this interruption

was due to issues directly related to one's disability, or a lack of awareness and understanding of disability issues in the workplace. The job seekers sometimes sacrificed the opportunity for more support because of the perceived stigma associated with disclosing a hidden disability. Furthermore, unreliable transportation and inaccessible workplaces only limited employment options, leaving job seekers with longer gaps in their work history to explain to potential employers.

Recommendations:

- ▶ Conduct a thorough “holistic” assessment to uncover details about the individual's work history. In addition to considering the person's previous places of employment, take into account issues such as their motivation for specific employment goals, experiences they have found rewarding, or frustrations they have encountered along the way.
- ▶ Determine the reasons for previous interruptions in work history. Address these issues in defining choices and identifying critical job characteristics in order to avoid future employment difficulties.
- ▶ Consider the perspective of the individual at various stages in their career path, and cater services to meet these needs. For example, someone who is well established in a specific career field may have different expectations and requirements than an individual just beginning the job search.
- ▶ Address the need for possible accommodations that may eliminate or minimize barriers. For example, a simple schedule modification may help with the obstacle of unreliable transportation.

Build Self-Determination

Comments from participants illustrated the importance they perceived in taking control of their own job search. This concept of “taking control” meant leading the job finding process, not allowing oneself to rely solely on the support of the system, and not allowing the many facets of the job search to be done by someone else. The importance of control and self-directedness to the respondents was immense because it increased the likelihood that the services they received would be tailored and individualized. Self-directedness is a theme widely researched in the disability field (Stancliffe, Abery, Springborg & Elkin, 2000; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001). The term self-determination signifies that the consumer has freedom, support, authority, and responsibility (Shumway, 1999). Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Suarez, de la Rosa & Castro (1997) describe it as gaining understanding, accessing resources, and working with others to achieve common goals.

In order to build self-determination, consumers should be encouraged to exercise informed choice. This refers to the process that occurs within a partnership where options at each decision point in the rehabilitation are identified and explored together. Positive and negative implications from the consumer's perspective are identified and the counselor provides support as needed for the consumer to make informed choices to ultimately find a satisfactory employment outcome (Fry, 1995). Informed choice is a key aspect of a consumer directed system. Unfortunately, individuals with disabilities often have limited opportunities for learning

and practicing decision-making and self-direction, not necessarily due to their limitations or impairments, but because of the attitudes and practices of caregivers, service providers, and social institutions. Individuals may not be given the opportunity to make choices or to obtain information or experience that would allow for good decision-making (West & Parent, 1992). The use of informed choice throughout the rehabilitation process is necessary in order for agencies to be effective service delivery programs, and consumers must be given opportunities to exercise this concept.

Recommendations:

- ▶ Empower job seekers through teaching job search techniques rather than simply showing or doing for them.
- ▶ Foster self-determination by encouraging individual choice-making and involvement in all stages of the job search process.
- ▶ Use workshops to build job seeker communication skills that will inevitably assist them in requesting accommodations or addressing disclosure either during the job search or at the workplace.
- ▶ Educate individuals about employment rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. This is valuable in order to build the competence of the job seeker to make his/her own disclosure decisions. Fear of discrimination is a legitimate concern affecting decisions about disclosure that creates barriers throughout the job search process, and education about one's protections can help. ADA familiarity will also build the capacity of job seeker to request accommodations.

Ways to Build Agency Competence

Promote Consumer-Directed Policies

Just as the self-directedness and the self-determination of the individual should be supported, building the agency's capacities to be consumer-directed is equally as important. Consumer-directedness refers to activities that allow consumers with disabilities to develop a sense of personal control. In a consumer-directed system, individuals can assess their own needs, determine how and by whom these needs should be met, and monitor the quality of services received (Nadash, 1998). Consumers may be empowered throughout the service delivery process in ways such as choosing to receive services from a specific provider, deciding on an occupation and employment placement, and participating in the development of training methods and support strategies that might be most effective for their needs (West & Parent, 1992). They should control and direct service delivery, have a say in the variety and type of services available, and participate in systems design and resource allocation (Kosciulek, 1999).

Recommendations:

- ▶ Encourage choice of outside vendors through the provision of cash or vouchers. A voucher system in employment supports would empower consumers to decide which services they wished to purchase and from where they wanted to purchase such services. The consumers therefore have the responsibility for making sure their service needs are met.

- ▶ Maximize the use of advisory boards by ensuring that a high percentage of consumers are present (at least 50%). In addition, advisory boards should influence agency policy and have governing say regarding service allocation.
- ▶ Seek consumer input regarding staff hiring/firing, promotions, and program rules and publicity. This can be done by ensuring an adequate percentage of consumers on agency staff and making sure these staff members hold a variety of positions within different levels in the organization.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for consumers to evaluate the quality of their services. Solicit feedback from consumers and use this feedback to implement changes in the system.
- ▶ Actively teach self-determination and decision-making with regard to resource management.

Provide a Clear Path to Accommodations and Resources

Findings showed that the successful job seeker was able to rely on agencies for access to needed resources. Study participants benefited from being able to access the right type of job listings, training opportunities, technical resources and post-placement advice from counselors. Access to such resources can produce what Zimmerman & Warchausky (1998) described as critical awareness, which refers to one's knowledge of how to acquire resources and skills that are necessary to manage resources once they are obtained. This knowledge can be gained through empowering processes provided by the agency, such as training programs that provide opportunities to develop and improve skills and knowledge, learn leadership, and facilitate goal setting and help consumers become more self-reliant and self-governing (Zimmerman & Warchausky, 1998). Access to job finding resources that are accessible forms a solid knowledge of the necessary skills for achieving one's job search goals while empowering the job seekers in the process.

Recommendations:

- ▶ Ensure the accessibility of resources. Use adapted formats including large print and Braille, along with adapted and accessible computer equipment.
- ▶ Make sure there is a clear path to resources, especially if the job seeker needs more intensive training and/or services. This requires strong communication and assessment skills and creating an environment where consumers feel comfortable asking for additional help.
- ▶ Recognize the level of support and individual wants and needs in the job search and adapt service options accordingly.
- ▶ Clarify the types of services that individuals can expect to receive at the various agencies. Instruct job seekers as part of an orientation process about what type of services are available.

Ensure a Positive Agency Culture

Job seekers in this study were satisfied if the social and physical environments were comfortable and manageable. A difficult entry for the job seeker added to the discomfort or discriminatory feel of the agency. Inaccessibility or an unfriendly receptionist in the lobby created an

unwelcome first impression that set the tone for the rest of the experience in the system. If the job seeker senses a lack of conviviality, it may create barriers in accessing the information and assistance necessary to find work. Poor agency culture, therefore, was associated with low satisfaction with the agency experience.

Recommendations:

- ▶ Maintain an awareness of the physical environment including signage that conveys a positive and safe tone. In addition, attention to accommodations such as including ramps, doors, and accessible bathrooms allow the facility to be useful to all job seekers.
- ▶ Maintain an awareness of the agency's social environment, focusing on the general demeanor of all staff. The creation of a welcoming agency is crucial. Even more important than the positive attitudes and responses of the counselor might be the interaction with the first person to greet job seekers upon entry.

Coordinate Services

In many cases, findings showed that study participants had used multiple services to meet a variety of employment needs. The skillful job seeker uses each service for his or her purposes and is not overwhelmed with dealing with numerous personnel and agency resources. A successful consumer is also able to make the most of having to “make the rounds” to many different organizations, and he or she can make it more manageable by organizing the visits in order to get the most from each meeting.

One important issue regarding the use of multiple services is the level of coordination. The benefit to the individual is greatly enhanced when the service providers work in coordination with one another. If the different agencies are not working collaboratively, it can result in inefficient service delivery, such as overlap in services or a lack of service provision in other areas. Previous research has indicated that interagency linkages can increase the probability of successful rehabilitation outcomes. Dellario (1985) studied the effect of Mental Health and Vocational Rehabilitation interagency functioning on the vocational rehabilitation of individuals with psychiatric disabilities, and found that individuals who used agencies with highly functioning interagency linkages had increased probabilities of a successful vocational rehabilitation outcome. Findings also indicated that the most successful agency pairs shared a common perspective with regard to their responsibilities and had a mutual respect for the counterpart agency (Dellario, 1985). Rogers, Anthony & Danley (1989) found that interagency collaboration between state VR and MH systems resulted in more efficient and effective agency functioning and improved consumer outcomes.

In reality, coordination and cooperation between state agencies is not an easy task. Mazella (2000) described some of the systemic barriers to interagency collaboration. These obstacles include differences in organizational culture and procedures, which often lead to an unwillingness to take risks or compromise; funding sources, which may limit flexibility in the sharing of resources; turf issues, in which one or more of the organizations do not want to

relinquish power and responsibility for the services of the individual; and the misperception by stakeholders that regulations will not permit collaboration.

Mattessich & Monsey (1992) identified six factors that are influential in the success of collaborations between agencies. These factors are: the social, political, and physical environment; the characteristics of the partnered agencies, such as mutual respect and ability to compromise; the processes used to make decisions and accomplish goals; the communication channels established between all stakeholders; the purpose and vision of the collaborative effort; and the availability of resources to support the collaboration.

Recommendations:

- ▶ Encourage facilitation of interagency linkages by strengthening a shared sense of purpose and mutual respect between service systems.
- ▶ Develop an agreement outlining the mission, objectives, and strategy of the collaboration and make changes in practices at the service delivery level.
- ▶ Initiate and maintain dialogue between personnel at each agency using formal and informal communication links.
- ▶ Create opportunities for local collaboratives to learn from each other and build mutual support networks.
- ▶ Inform key stakeholders of the benefits of collaboration and provide incentives for agencies to collaborate.

Ways that Systems and Individuals Can Work Collaboratively

In the previous section, recommendations for building competence of the job seeker and the state system were considered separately. In the following section, implications and recommendations for both parties to consider as they work together to achieve the goal of having the job seeker reach a successful employment outcome will be considered. This section outlines the complementary relationship that can exist between the job seeker and the state system, and how the employment process is facilitated when both parties are able to work together as a part of a collaborative achievement toward the common goal of improved employment outcomes.

Develop Strong Counselor-Consumer Relationships

Rehabilitation counselors in consumer-directed systems play an important role by working as partners with consumers in an informed choice model of service delivery. Fry (1995) suggests that counselors should approach consumers with an open mind, using communication skills to help consumers explore options and support consumer decision-making throughout the rehabilitation process. This relationship can be established by encouraging the consumer to provide input throughout the process, from the initial evaluation to the final post-placement supports. Consumers need to understand their skills, abilities, talents, and interests, and how these relate to their career options. Counselors should use their knowledge and professional experience to provide information for consumers so that they may exercise informed choice.

There are many benefits of consumer informed choice in the rehabilitation process. An informed customer is more likely to be satisfied with the services than one who feels disconnected from the process. Informed consumers are also more likely to find an appropriate placement in a meaningful career, and are therefore less likely to need future services (Fry, 1995).

Individuals in the study consistently noted the importance of quality personnel who were reliable, consistent, and provided emotional support throughout the job search process. These counselors, who were representatives of the larger system for which they worked, provided individualized attention to successfully match services with needs. This ongoing contact allowed relationships to develop and the counselor and individual to be proactive in the job search together.

Regardless of how positive the experience with the counselor was, individuals reported the necessary element of remaining in control of their own job search. As findings demonstrated, most of the job seekers were only satisfied when they felt involved throughout the process of the job search, were able to make significant choices, and felt empowered with a sense of control over the events, goals, and plans related to the task at hand. In addition, job seekers noted the importance of counselor and system responsiveness to their changing needs and desires. As a result, it is crucial that the job seeker and counselor work together to achieve this delicate balance of power and establish reciprocity in reaching their common goals.

Chan, Shaw, McMahon, Koch & Strauser (1997) describe the effective counselor-consumer relationship as a “working alliance,” a collaboration in which the counselor and consumer make equal contributions to the counseling relationship. The necessary characteristics of a working alliance include the recognized equality of the consumer and counselor and their shared responsibility for the planning and ultimate outcomes of the rehabilitation process (McAlees & Menz, 1992). Chan et al. (1997) proposed that discrepancies in expectations between the two parties can interfere with this relationship, and that a strengthened working alliance between the counselor and consumer would result in higher levels of consumer satisfaction and more positive rehabilitation outcomes.

Shared Responsibility

The notion of shared responsibility is a key factor in a successful counselor-consumer relationship. Previous researchers have noted its importance during the job search process (Temelini & Fesko, 1996). The system is responsible for both supporting consumers and helping them to develop skills that can be used throughout the job search process. Because of the complementary relationship between the self-directedness of consumers and the above-and-beyond assistance of the counselors, both parties are responsible for making sure the interaction will be productive and claim equal responsibility in the task at hand. The ideal relationship requires that this delicate balance in the job seeking effort is achieved through the work of both individuals. Reciprocity is apparent when the system provides advice, recommendations, and support, while at the same time the consumer fulfills requirements as an active participant (Hanley-Maxwell, Pogoloff & Whitney-Thomas, 1998). This makes the exchange more of a “consumer- and counselor-directed service” than a consumer-directed service.

Good Communication

Clear communication between the consumer and the “system” was found to be one of the major elements that led to success in the search for suitable employment. The relationships that were defined as successful were described as the relationships that were based on equal exchange, in which both individuals are empowered, and neither feels misunderstood. In the process of negotiating control in the job search process, the consumer must tell the counselor what is important to him or her, as the counselor tells the consumer what is imperative to him or her at the same time. Another key aspect of good communication is that both the counselor and the job seeker must be open to accepting suggestions for improvement expressed by the other person.

Recommendations:

- ▶ Form a working alliance between the job seeker and the system in which the consumer and counselor work together to develop goals and objectives and follow through with them together throughout the employment process.
- ▶ Job seeker responsibilities include commitment to the job search, taking initiative in the job search process, and expressing needs to the counselor.
- ▶ Counselor responsibilities include offering the consumer individualized and personalized attention, providing motivation to continue, and continuing the provision of emotional support.
- ▶ Maintain an open line of communication with an equal exchange of information and resources between the counselor and the job seeker throughout the process.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of individuals as consumers of employment support from state service systems. Five key components that individuals found effective in service delivery emerged from the findings. These components include a comfortable agency culture, a consumer-directed service delivery model, accessible resources, reliable and supportive personnel, and effective service coordination of the agencies. The findings indicated that the presence of these components improved the consumers’ experiences with the state service systems. It was also clear that the individuals acquired skills as they moved through the service systems that allowed them to tailor the systems’ services to meet their needs, while learning how to overcome obstacles that they encountered during their search for employment.

This analysis of these experiences emphasized the importance of the consumers in developing their own strategies to successfully find employment, and also suggested that there were steps that could be taken by state systems to improve the services provided. By providing recommendations on what the individual can do, how the state system can adapt, and ways both parties can better coordinate their efforts, this study outlines some potential ways to promote successful outcomes. When both the individual and the system work together, the supports built can be lasting and mutually beneficial in both present and future attempts to find satisfactory employment opportunities.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Participant Demographic Form

Interview Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Name of interviewee: _____

Where are you currently employed? _____

How long have you been employed in present job? _____

Which agency(ies) helped you find your most recent job? (Check all that apply)

VR _____

MR/DD _____

MH agencies _____

One-Stop Center _____

TANF office _____

Please indicate the region/local office. _____

Age: _____

Gender: Male _____ Female _____

Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

Yes _____ No _____

What category(ies) best represents your primary disability? (Check all that apply)

_____ Physical Disability (e.g., mobility or other functional limitation)

_____ Cognitive Disability (e.g., mental retardation, traumatic brain injury)

_____ Learning Disability (e.g., dyslexia)

_____ Mental Illness (e.g., depression, schizophrenia)

_____ Sensory Impairment (e.g., vision or hearing impaired)

_____ Other, please specify: _____

How do you describe your racial or ethnic background?

African-American _____

Asian/Pacific Islander _____

Caucasian _____

Haitian _____

Latino/Hispanic _____

Native American _____

Other (please specify) _____

What is your highest level of education?

Some High School _____

High School Degree _____

Some College _____

College Degree _____

Some Graduate School _____

Graduate Degree _____

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

I. Why did you decide to look for work?

probe: Who did you talk to/who helped you to decide about looking for work?

What kind of job would you like to do? (interests, etc.)

What kind of job did you think you would get? (expectations)

Once you decided that you wanted to work, what did you do to go about getting a job?

Did you think about seeking assistance from an agency?

Do you receive any services from (Department of Mental Health or Department of Mental Retardation) what are they, describe them.

II. Access: Why/How did you seek assistance from that agency(s)?

probe:How did you hope this agency might help?

What was your first impression of the agency?

probe:What was it like to walk in? Did you feel welcome?

What did the agency do to assess your job qualifications? What was that experience like?

probe:What worked well, what didn't work well, how could it be improved?

III. Experience with the System

What did the agency do to help you find out about job possibilities?

What did the agency do to help you get that job?

probe:What worked well, what didn't work well, how could it be improved?

What were your experiences with the caseworkers?

probe:How were you treated?

Were they aware of your particular disability?

Did their suggestions match your interests and abilities?

Were they aware of disability issues such as reasonable accommodations and possible wage and health care disincentives to work?

Did you find the environment to be accessible? How?

(probe: materials, signage, physical accessibility, information, other accommodations)

Were there choices/options offered throughout the process?

probe:Did people listen to you?

Were you encouraged to use supports that seemed unnecessary or didn't work or that you didn't want to use?

Did anyone explain to you your legal rights if you felt that you were treated unfairly?

Who or what helped in the job search process? How?

probe:What did you like about the service provided?

What did people who assisted you do that was helpful?

Who or what didn't help in the job search process? How?

probe: What characteristics of the service delivery/state agency were barriers?

What supports were missing?

If using more than one system, in what ways were supports coordinated across agencies?

IV. Tell me about your current situation

probe: Was there a discussion about supports/accommodations after job placement?

What was that like?

How satisfied are you with your current situation?

probe: Are you happy with your job? What do you like most about it?

V. Conclusions

What would you change about the system to best assist others in finding a job?

How would you advise others who are starting the process?

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