A Model of Employment Supports for Job Seekers with Intellectual Disabilities

Alberto Migliore, PhD, University of Massachusetts Boston

Kelly Nye-Lengerman, PhD, University of Minnesota

Oliver Lyons, MS, University of Massachusetts Boston

Jennifer Bose, MA, University of Massachusetts Boston

John Butterworth, PhD, University of Massachusetts Boston

Contact:

Alberto Migliore
Institute for Community Inclusion
University of Massachusetts Boston
100 William T. Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125
617-287-4306
alberto.migliore@umb.edu
http://www.communityinclusion.org/

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Abstract

Interviews with 16 employment consultants—triangulated with job seekers, family members, and supervisors—revealed a model of employment supports aligned with the elements described in the literature, although with an added emphasis on (a) building trust as a key element starting from day one; (b) a circular process converging on the job match; (c) and flexible intensity of supports. The model can be used for improving clarity in communication with employment consultants about effective employment support practices for assisting job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Introduction

Employment rates for individuals with cognitive disabilities remain low at 24%, compared to 78% for people without disabilities. Moreover, workers with cognitive disabilities typically work limited work hours and earn lower wages (Butterworth et al., 2015; Erickson, Lee, & Schrader, 2016). To bridge the employment gap between adults with disabilities and the general population, federal and state employment policies exist (APSE, 2014; Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2014; Moseley 2009; Nord, Luecking, Mank, Kiernan, & Wray, 2013; NACDD, 2011). These policies provide the foundational framework for change, but policies alone are not enough. Ultimately, the successful transition of adults with disabilities into employment depends upon the effectiveness of the support services available to them (Luecking, Fabian, & Tilson, 2004). Therefore, research is needed to continuously document effective employment support strategies and the extent to which they are translated into practice (Glover & Frounfelker 2013; Migliore, Butterworth, Nord, Cox, & Gelb, 2012; Timmons et al., 2011).

These support strategies are often described in the context of overarching models for support, including traditional train-and-place models, supported employment, and customized employment (Bellamy & Melia, 1991; Callahan, 2003; Griffin, Hammis, Geary & Sullivan, 2008; Parent, Sherron, Stallard, & Booth, 1993; Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998). A common element of these models is learning about job seekers' preferences and skills to inform the job search. Emphasis is on understanding what motivates job seekers through learning about their passions, values, strengths, and challenges (Cardy, 2016; Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007; Griffin-Hammis, 2014; Phillips et al., 2009). The self-determination literature is an important contribution, recommending that support professionals assist people with disabilities in the pursue of their deep aspirations (Barrows et al., 2016; Shogren et al., 2016; Wehmeyer, 2011).

Connecting with family members or other individuals in job seekers' lives is another key step for ensuring success (Francis, Gross, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2014; Jones & Gallus, 2016). However, families' roles may vary, depending on how much families are typically involved in other aspects of job seekers' lives (ACICIEID, 2015; Blacher, Kraemer, & Howell, 2010; Gross, Francis, & Pijem, 2015).

Transitioning into employment requires addressing other support needs early in the process, including transportation and benefits planning. Clearly identifying transportation solutions early in the process is key for employment success and job retention (Haveman, Tillmann, Stöppler, Kvas, & Monninger, 2013; NADTC, 2016). Work incentive planning is recommended to make it possible for job seekers to pursue better-paying jobs through discounting disability and work-related expenses from taxable income (Condon & Callahan, 2008; Delin, Hartman, & Sell, 2012).

Finding jobs is one of the core functions of employment consultants. The literature recommends searching for jobs in the hidden job market. This includes jobs that are not advertised, jobs in the process of being advertised, or jobs that can be created or modified through customization with an employer. To tap into the hidden job market, employment consultants need to be familiar with the local economy and master the art of networking (Darling, 2010; Granovetter, 1995; Petner-Arrey, Howell-Moneta, & Lysaght, 2016; Stensrud, Sover-Wright, & Gilbride, 2009). Focusing on employers' needs (Gilbride & Stensrud, 2008) and negotiating new job descriptions are key traits that help employment consultants to find jobs when openings are not available (Callahan, 2003; Griffin et al., 2007; Riesen, Morgan, & Griffin, 2015; Nietupski & Hamre-Nietupski, 2000).

After a job seeker has secured a job, employment consultants may provide a variety of supports to ensure inclusion in the workplace and job retention. When possible, employment consultants facilitate supports from the job seeker's co-workers (Hagner, Dague, & Phillips, 2014; Hoff et al., 2000; Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1999; Wehman et al., 2012).

Purpose and research question

While extensive literature about effective employment support strategies is available, research indicates that these strategies are not consistently implemented (Butterworth et al., 2012; Migliore et al., 2010; Migliore et al., 2012). One useful first step to increase implementation is to ensure that these strategies are organized into a clear, easy-to-communicate model that employment consultants can easily understand and use to inform their decisions about which strategy to implement and the intensity of implementation.

The purpose of this study was to organize the knowledge about effective employment support practices in an easy-to-communicate model of supports for employment consultants. The long-term goal was to improve the quality of employment support services for job seekers with intellectual disabilities, and thus to improve their employment outcomes and economic self-sufficiency. The following research question guided our work: What employment support practices are recommended for supporting job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities in gaining paid individual employment, and how do these practices connect with each other in a comprehensive model of support?

Method

The research design was qualitative based on a grounded theory approach through semi-structured phone interviews with effective employment consultants (Corbin & Strauss 2015; Creswell, 2013). Using a Critical Incident Technique approach, we asked the employment

consultants to focus on a specific job seeker with intellectual and developmental disabilities who recently gained paid individual employment and whose support practices represented the way the employment consultants typically operated (Hagner, Noll, & Donovan, 2002; Hughes, 2012).

The findings were triangulated through interviewing the job seekers mentioned in the consultants' interviews, the job seekers' family members, and the supervisors of employment consultants. A working draft of the findings was distributed to interviewees for member checking (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Paid individual employment was defined as a job that paid at least minimum wage; was paid by the host company, not the employment program; and was in a business where the majority of co-workers were adults without disabilities.

Participants

The 16 employment consultants—a number considered to be adequate for achieving saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006)—were recruited through a call for nominations sent to 53 professionals known for their expertise in employment supports, nationally. The research team reviewed 41 nominations, and selected 16 employment consultants who best represented diverse job seekers' support needs, community characteristics, geographies, and support strategies.

The 16 employment consultants were from 14 employment programs in 12 states.[1] These programs operated in rural (n=8), suburban (n=9), or urban (n=9) settings. Several programs

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[1] California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Oregon, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin (one consultant per state); Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, and Virginia (two consultants per state).

were part of large organizations that provided a variety of services, in addition to employment, including community-based non-work (n=8), facility-based work (n=2), facility-based non-work (n=2), residential services (n=8), and other services (n=5). Only one organization provided exclusively integrated employment services. Most of these programs operated in multiple locations within the state (n=8) or within the municipal boundaries (n=3). One program operated offices across two states.

Most employment consultants had been providing job development services for at least five years (M=7; n=9). Four employment consultants reported that in a typical year they assisted up to five job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities in securing paid individual employment, six reported assisting six to ten job seekers, and the remaining two employment consultants assisted over ten job seekers. Four employment consultants reported also assisting job seekers with other disabilities in securing employment. All employment consultants but one reported working 40 or more hours a week. The age of the consultants ranged from 26 to 52 years old (M=42; n=13).

The job seekers who found paid individual employment with support from the consultants included eight adults with intellectual disabilities, five adults with autism, and one adult with other developmental disabilities. The level of support at the time of hire ranged from continuous (n=8) to intermittent or occasional support (n=4), and no support needed (n=2). Seven job seekers had legal guardians, and six were their own guardians. Five job seekers were at their first experience in paid individual employment, whereas four had previously worked for pay in one or two jobs, and five had had more than two paid jobs.

In their current jobs, job seekers worked between 3.5 and 40 hours a week (M=17; n=13), and most earned between $7.25 and $10 per hour (M=$8.63; n=10). One self-employed job

seeker reported no earnings at the time of the study. Job seekers' length of employment at the time of the interviews ranged from one month to five years (M=2.3; n=14). Four job seekers were self-employed. The ages of the job seekers ranged from 22 to 52 (M=31; n=13). Table 1 shows additional demographic information about the participants.

<Table 1>

Measurement

A semi-structured interview protocol of 15 open-ended questions was used. The interviews lasted about one hour, and began with an informed consent process and verbal agreement to the interview. Next, the interviewer asked the employment consultants to think about a job seeker with intellectual and developmental disabilities who recently gained paid individual employment, and who represented the employment support strategies typically implemented. The follow-up questions focused on the characteristics of the job seeker, the job, and the specific support strategies typically used by the employment consultant. For example, employment consultants were asked, *How did you approach getting to know [job seeker] and developing a placement plan? Which strategies have been more effective? With whom did you interact?* The interview protocol for supervisors, job seekers, and family members was adapted from the protocol used with the employment consultants. The protocol for the job seekers included plain language and was framed to minimize acquiescence (McDonald, 2012; Stancliffe et al., 2015).

The interviews with employment consultants and with the supervisors ended with an invitation to share some demographic information about themselves and the job seekers through an online survey. Two employment consultants and two supervisors declined to complete the survey. One employment consultant provided partial data.

Procedure

Three pairs of researchers conducted the telephone interviews between June 2015 and December 2015. Upon completing an interview, the employment consultants were asked to ask their supervisors, job seekers, and family members if they were available to schedule an interview with the researchers. We were able to interview seven job seekers. The remaining job seekers could not be reached, either because the employment consultants were not able to connect with the job seekers or their guardians, or because the job seeker declined to participate. Either a family member or an employment consultant joined the interviews of five job seekers who requested support with communication. Similarly, we were able to interview the family members of seven job seekers, including five mothers, two fathers, and one sibling (in one instance, both the person's mother and father attended the interview).

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a third-party vendor. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the universities where the study was carried out.

Data Analysis

The research team reviewed the transcripts to identify initial emerging themes and codes. Meetings were held every other week to discuss and refine the proposed codes until consensus was achieved on a final list of 13 codes (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Using these codes, the researchers coded the transcripts and generated memos that were reviewed and discussed at team meetings with the goal of organizing the emerging themes. Finally, researchers consolidated the findings in a summary that was emailed to the participants for member checking. An employment consultant and a supervisor provided feedback, which was included in the final findings. The qualitative data analysis was carried out using ATLAS.ti software.

Findings

The interviews with the participants revealed a model of employment support organized around five elements and corresponding goals (Figure 1). Four elements gravitate around identifying the job match, and include building trust to engage the job seeker/family, getting to know job seekers to identify job search criteria, finding tasks/jobs to get job offers, and supports planning to smooth the job entry. After a job match is identified, hire follows. Support after hire is provided to enhance retention and advancement. The model has an emphasis on (a) building trust as a key step starting from day one; (b) the circular nature of the process converging around a job match, emphasizing the iterative and overlapping relationship of the elements that lead up to job placement; and (c) recognition that the intensity of supports and strategies used within each element vary and need to be thoughtfully selected based on the individual characteristics of the job seekers.

<Figure 1>

Building trust

Building trust with job seekers was key for engaging the person and ensuring their openness and candor about their true preferences and deeper aspirations. In turn, knowing the job seeker's true preferences and deeper aspirations was essential to increase the chances of identifying the best job match, thus maximizing job satisfaction, minimizing support after hire, and optimizing job retention. While building trust occurs across all activities of the employment process, this element emphasizes being intentional about allocating time for relationship building from day one.

Building trust was achieved through treating job seekers with respect, treating them as adults, and prioritizing job seekers' aspirations, despite the sometimes louder voices of other stakeholders.

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> *always listen to the individual first and make sure that their voice is heard because it's very easy for that voice to get lost amongst agencies, the family, the state, the employer, if they're employed, other various community members and team members. And it's not fair for that individual because of their services to only be ten percent of that team. Their voice needs to be weighed more than any other*

An employment consultant reported that his organization did not hesitate to authorize leisure activities like playing Frisbee golf if this helped to build rapport with a job seeker. Another employment consultant described his approach for building trust with job seekers by making it clear with the job seeker that finding a job was a team activity that included the job seeker as a partner:

> *I've got to establish some ground rules from the beginning: number one ground rule is 'I'm not here to find you a job. You and I together as a team are going to find a job'*

Another major aspect of building trust was connecting with family members, if they were active in the job seekers' lives. Respondents identified several benefits. Families support their sons and daughters in numerous aspects of life. Therefore, it seemed natural that they would participate in the employment process. Second, families had known job seekers for their whole life and, thus, could provide a perspective that employment consultants would not get from the limited amount of time they spent with job seekers. Third, without early involvement, anxiety after receiving a job offer could cause some families' last-minute change of mind and withdrawal of supports for their sons' and daughters' employment. Finally, families could play an important role supporting their sons and daughters throughout the job development process, including providing emotional support, helping to prepare for job interviews, networking for job leads, helping with transportation, contributing to problem solving, and spotting potential crises at workplaces after hire.

To connect with families, communication from day one was key. Strategies included inviting family members to formal and informal meetings, or to picnics or lunch appreciation events; copying them on relevant email correspondence; or making phone calls to check in about how things were going. A supervisor emphasized the importance of communicating with families at least every other week through phone calls, not just emails.

> *I learned to finally really put my trust in* [the employment consultant]*, … But that was the hardest thing as a parent was to let go of that and give it to somebody else*

But not all experiences with families were the same. We heard that the intensity of involvement varied, with some families getting overly involved to the point of hindering the employment process, other families happy to be involved in a balanced way, and other families inclined to delegate everything to the employment consultants.

Getting to know job seekers

Getting to know job seekers was key for informing the job search criteria, thus optimizing job matching and finding jobs that led to higher job satisfaction and longer job retention.

> *Now that we've done a better job at discovery, … the job coach's role has really shifted … to make connections so that they can back out of the job pretty quickly.*

Understanding job seekers' deep motivations was described as an individualized process focused on learning about job seekers' passions, values, strengths, challenges, vision for themselves, dislikes, non-negotiables, and other motivating factors. It was about seeing an individual's gifts, talents, and interests rather than focusing on disability labels, poor work history, or behavioral challenges.

An employment consultant emphasized that the best way to gather this information was not through reviewing forms, reading files, or completing checklists in an office. It was through asking a lot of "what," "why," and "how come" questions, and being a good listener. Every desire expressed by a job seeker, even if perceived as hard to attain, was welcomed as an opportunity for digging for insights about the job seeker's deeper aspirations:

> *"…so I began to ask him questions like why he enjoyed being an artist so much. And he came up with some very interesting answers: he said that he liked solitude, that he liked the ability to work in a quiet place, and that he liked to work in great detail and make sure that everything was exactly just right…"*

Another strategy for getting to know job seekers was observing or participating with them in typical environments, including in their homes, at community activities, on volunteer sites, and via situational assessments or job shadowing in workplaces. Volunteering and job shadowing also helped job seekers to learn about themselves and what they liked.

Supports planning

The employment consultants described a range of support activities designed to anticipate the job seeker's support needs once employed. These included assisting them with improving work and social skills, planning for transportation to and from work, planning for communication and technology supports, and facilitating work incentive planning.

To help job seekers expand their understanding of workplaces and to practice interacting with people in professional situations, employment consultants arranged for tours of businesses and informational interviews. Touring businesses was not intended to find the individual a job there. Instead, the goal was to expose job seekers to a variety of work environments, give them an opportunity to practice social interactions with a number of different employers and workers, and help them form a more accurate opinion about real workplaces.

Touring businesses was beneficial for employment consultants as well. It was an opportunity for them to observe job seekers in real-life situations and learn about their strengths and support needs when interacting with employers and co-workers. Moreover, employment consultants could observe the work flow, learn about the work cultures, ask questions critical for identifying tasks that could be repackaged into new job descriptions, and cultivate relationships with the host employers for possible future placements.

Touring businesses was also beneficial for employers. Some appreciated the opportunity to showcase their business and talk about their successes. Because of the low-pressure context, employers were more comfortable getting to know job seekers and learning about disability. These elements facilitated connecting with employers, and in some cases led to a hire, even if that was not the initial goal.

If touring a business was not possible, informational interviews were a good alternative. They consisted of interviewing employers about their business operations and what they were looking for in job applicants. Following up on these conversations, employment consultants could ask employers for advice about other business owners who might be contacted to expand their networks.

> *Okay, well you know a little bit this person now. Where do you think we should go next in…continuing the exploration of a career or a job path for this person?*

Planning for transportation to and from workplaces was another key activity for ensuring the sustainability of employment. Employment consultants favored solutions that maximized job seekers' mobility independence, including teaching them how to use public transportation, if available. A supervisor emphasized that it was never too early to brainstorm transportation solutions, including looking for jobs closer to job seekers' residences or on public transportation

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routes, or finding jobs where co-workers were available for sharing rides. In some cases, solutions relied on involving family members and co-workers, brainstorming other community resources, or—if funding was available and no other solutions were practical—having the employment program deliver transportation.

Finally, employment consultants reported that they offered advice to families and job seekers about work incentive planning. This included identifying work incentives that would lower the person's countable income, thus increasing the potential for higher wages leading to financial independence.

Finding tasks/jobs

Finding tasks/jobs was a core element for increasing the chances of finding the best job matches. A focus on looking for tasks, rather than for jobs, helps expand the opportunities beyond available job openings, and encourages thinking outside the box. Listening to employers' needs and seeking a match to a job seeker's preferences and skills is important for better job matches. A supervisor recommended examining workplaces in depth to identify tasks that no one was doing and that, if addressed, would add value to a business. Combining existing tasks in different ways was a valued strategy for expanding job opportunities.

I care less about jobs and I care more about tasks.

While an existing job may be a good match, this approach provides a more open and flexible approach to engaging employers.

To find the best job matches, several employment consultants and supervisors recommended starting by using job seekers' and family members' personal connections. This approach made sense in at least two ways. First, it helped to expand the consultants' networks of employers beyond their own circle of connections. Second, it helped to connect with employers

who knew the job seekers and, therefore, were more likely to collaborate in developing natural

supports after hire.

To find out about job seekers and family members' connections, an employment

consultant reported preferring to engage job seekers' families in casual conversations—rather

than filling out forms—about where they shopped, had their car repaired, went out for meals,

went for recreational activities, or worked. This informal approach was preferred because it

revealed connections that job seekers and family members otherwise might have omitted,

thinking those connections to be irrelevant. Regardless of the approach, there was not an

expectation that job seekers or family members themselves would reach out to employers.

Instead, employment consultants connected with employers:

> *Hey, the Smiths have been a member of your golf course for a long*
> *time. We want to talk to you about your business*

In addition to relying on job seekers' and family members' networks, employment consultants

reported that they cultivated their own professional networks of employers without necessarily

having specific job seekers in mind. To this end, they attended business events, built

relationships with businesses where they were customers (e.g., their usual coffee shop), or

stopped by businesses that from the outside looked like possible employment venues. Some

employment consultants reported that expanding their network of employers had to do more with

a state of mind than a conscious activity. For example, an employment consultant admitted that

even when she was traveling out of state, she looked at businesses wondering how many of them

would be a good fit for the job seekers on her caseload.

Another approach was to browse job postings on the Internet without the goal of applying

for those job openings. Competition was too high. Instead, the goal was to identify businesses

likely to be expanding, and follow up with them to explore possible job negotiation opportunities.

A few employment consultants and supervisors reported using mapping search engines on the Internet to identify businesses, such as Google Map. This strategy was easy, immediate, and visual. It worked especially well when job seekers' transportation independence was an issue and finding a job close to home was the preferred option. It was also helpful for consultants who were new to the area and did not know many local businesses.

Employment consultants did not discuss social media or cold calling as a way to find new businesses. A supervisor explained that this was possibly because employment consultants were encouraged to go out and meet people face to face, rather than spending too much time behind computer screens. Moreover, some consultants were not using social media in their personal life, which might have explained not using them for work.

An employment consultant reported that another successful strategy for approaching employers was to portray her program as a provider of workforce solutions, including offering consultation around diversity awareness, labor regulations, and tax credits. The ability to offer these services paid dividends in the long run. As an employment consultant reported, some employers called her when job openings were available because they remembered her from her past disability awareness training. Another employment consultant emphasized the importance of keeping businesses' needs in mind as a strategy for gaining employers' attention. An example of this was meeting employers at a time and place convenient to them, including after office hours.

Support after hire

Support after hire was key for increasing job retention and advancement. After job entry, the focus was on ensuring that the job seeker was fully included in everything at work, whether it

be social events with co-workers, opportunities for performance evaluation that might lead to raises and increased job responsibilities, or other business practices.

Some workers needed support with learning tasks, for example, by breaking down complex tasks into smaller, easier steps. Pictures, apps for mobile devices, and video modeling were some of the support tools used to visualize step-by-step job tasks. Other employment consultants reported helping workers with communication strategies or alleviating anxiety. For example, an employment consultant described a one-page summary that a worker with a disability carried around and showed to co-workers to introduce herself. The page included a short description about her disability, how the disability influenced her behavior, and the best ways to help her. Co-workers loved the idea.

Finally, employment consultants and supervisors reported facilitating support from co-workers whenever possible. Relying on co-workers for support, rather than on job coaches, was considered desirable because it enhanced individuals' sense of belonging in the workplace, their job satisfaction, and their job retention. It was achieved through networking with co-workers:

> *I go in and I meet people and I see people and I develop relationships with people.*

Regardless of the support needs of workers, checking in after hire with short visits or calls emerged as a key strategy to ensure that all was progressing well and that changes in the workplaces did not jeopardize job retention.

Circularity and intensity

Progress across the four elements leading to a job match was circular. For example, while it was critical to start by establishing trust with the job seeker and his/her family members, employment consultants circled back to building trust throughout the process, including while getting to know the job seeker, providing support planning, or finding jobs. Similarly, while

getting to know the job seeker came before looking for jobs, once the employment consultants had enough information to start the job search, they still circled back to learning about job seekers' preferences and skills even while searching for jobs.

Not all job seekers received the same level of supports. The intensity of implementation of each element and the selection of specific support strategies varied based on the characteristics of each job seeker. Employment consultants were responsible for determining when the time was right to implement each element, and to which extent circling back to earlier elements was useful.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Discussion</h2>

The interviews with the participants revealed a model of employment supports largely aligned with the models described in the literature (Bellamy & Melia, 1991; Callahan, 2003; Griffin, Hammis, Geary, & Sullivan, 2008; Parent, Sherron, Stallard, & Booth, 1993; Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998). However, the findings from this study emphasized (a) building trust as a key step starting from day one, (b) a circular process of implementing the four elements converging on a job match, and (c) flexible supports of greater or lesser intensity driven by job seekers' individual characteristics. In addition, while the activities of supports planning are discussed in the literature, intentional supports planning prior to job placement is not typically defined as a unique model element.

Building trust at the onset was important for establishing candor in communication with job seekers and better understanding their true aspirations. Understanding these goals is a key ingredient for finding better job matches, greater job satisfaction, and longer job retention. This approach was consistent with the literature about self-determination and the emphasis on looking at adults with disabilities as people with goals, aspirations, and a right to make their own choices (Barrows et al., 2016; Shogren et al., 2016; Wehmeyer, 2011). Connecting with family members

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and others in a job seeker's network was another aspect of building trust, even though family involvement may vary, based on the family's relevance in job seekers' lives (Blacher, Kraemer, & Howell, 2010; Jones & Gallus, 2016; Migliore et al., 2007).

Consistent with the literature, employment consultants emphasized that getting to know job seekers' strengths and motivations was crucial for increasing the chances of finding the best job matches, minimizing support after hire, improving job satisfaction, and promoting job retention (Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007; Hoff et al., 2000; Phillips et al., 2009). The specific practices that emerged in this study were aligned with recommendations in the literature, including asking questions, observing job seekers in a variety of environments, and learning from others in the job seekers' lives who could provide alternative perspectives. Job desires that otherwise could be interpreted as hard to attain were valued as clues for understanding job seekers' deeper aspirations (Cardy, 2016; Callahan, Shumpert, & Condon, 2009; Griffin et al., 2007; Petner-Arrey, Howell-Moneta, & Lysaght, 2016; Phillips et al., 2009; Ratti et al., 2016; Wehman et al., 2016).

Another element of the model included supporting job seekers in improving their work and social skills, planning for transportation early in the process, and advising about work incentive planning. Although all these elements are described in the literature individually (Agran et al., 2014; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2016; Harvey et al., 2013; Haveman et al., 2013; Luecking & Luecking, 2013; Riesen et al., 2015), this study aggregated them in the "support planning" element, giving them greater visibility as key activities when planning services for job seekers.

The "finding tasks/jobs" element included strategies mostly consistent with those recommended in the literature, including networking and building relationships with businesses

and an emphasis on creating or adapting jobs consistent with a customized employment approach (Bolles, 2013; Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007; Petner-Arrey, Howell-Moneta, & Lysaght, 2016; Levinson & Perry, 2011). Employment consultants emphasized the need for listening to employers' needs and seeking a match between business needs and an individual's skills, as well as portraying an employment program as a provider of workforce solutions (Gilbride & Stensrud, 2008; Luecking, 2008). Interestingly, we did not hear much emphasis on using social media, although the literature recommends using social media to expand networks as well as to learn about employers (Darling, 2010; Manjo, 2010; Schawbel, 2010).

The final element of the model—supports after hire—also was aligned with the literature, recommending that employment consultants support the new hire in learning job tasks while becoming part of the social fabric of the workplace. Participants recommended promoting workplace inclusion and relationships with co-workers for increasing satisfaction and job retention (Barrows et al., 2016; Griffin et al., 2007; Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 1999; Wehman et al., 2012).

The five elements discussed in this article provide a roadmap for employment consultants about the broad direction for supporting job seekers. However, being familiar with these elements is not necessarily enough. Employment consultants need to know how much time they need to invest on each element, which specific strategies to implement within each element, and when they need to circle back to earlier elements. For example, when getting to know a job seeker, an employment consultant can choose among an array of strategies that include informal conversations with job seekers and their social networks, observation in community settings, situational assessment and job shadowing, or work trials. While the interviews highlighted the

complexity of making decisions about types and intensity of support strategies, investigation is needed to shed light on how to make those decisions.

Limitations and strengths

Some limitations may have impacted this study. Although a national network of experts nominated the employment consultants, these experts—and thus their nominees—represented only a subset of the available expertise on employment support in the nation. Moreover, while the research design included triangulating the findings by interviewing job seekers and their families, this goal was achieved only partially, with only seven job seekers and seven family members out of the 16 potential candidates taking part in interviews. Finally, although one hour-long interview per participant was sufficient to capture the key components of the model of supports, more extensive interviews might have provided more details and nuances about specific aspects of the model.

This study also has strengths. By asking employment consultants to focus on support activities implemented when assisting a specific job seeker, rather than in the abstract, this study provided a description of actual support activities rather than an account of theoretical principles or intentions, improving validity. Moreover, the findings were validated by triangulating the data with interviews with the job seekers referenced in the consultants' interviews, their family members, and supervisors of the employment consultants. Finally, because employment consultants were from a variety of different states and programs, the findings account for a range of socio-economic, cultural, and political environments, thus expanding validity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, we recommend that employment consultants organize their support activities around the following elements:

1. **Build trust**. Begin the process by establishing trust with the job seeker and connecting with their family members or others who play a role in the job seeker's life.

2. **Get to know the job seeker**. Get to know the job seeker through asking questions, listening, observing in community settings, and talking with others who know the job seeker. Focus on the job seeker's gifts, talents, and interests rather than on disability labels, poor work history, or behavioral challenges. Explore the job seeker's desires, even those that at first seem hard to attain, for clues about the job seeker's deep aspirations.

3. **Arrange for supports planning**. Plan early for addressing transportation, developing the job seeker's work and social skills, and implementing work incentive planning.

4. **Find tasks/find jobs**. Use the job seeker's and the family's networks to connect with new employers as well as expand your own professional network of employers. Show employers that you prioritize their needs. Portray your program as a provider of workforce solutions. If job openings are not available, look for tasks not jobs.

5. **Circle back and adjust the intensity of supports.** The elements of the job placement process are iterative and interactive, and may occur simultaneously. As you implement the employment process, keep the door open for circling back to earlier elements. Based on the individual characteristics of the job seeker you are assisting, you may need to adjust the intensity of your support activities for achieving a job match.

6. **Support after hire**. Once a job offer is accepted, make sure that the new hire is fully involved in the workplace and is treated as the other employees are. Keep in touch with the job seeker and the employer to make sure that all is well, and anticipate issues that can threaten job retention.

While these recommendations target employment consultants and managers in employment programs, other players can benefit too. For example, training specialists, administrators, funding agencies, and policy makers can promote this model of support by aligning protocols, tools, training curricula, and policies with this model. Researchers should fine-tune the model of supports, strengthening the decision-making process within each element and outlining in more detail the array of strategies that might be used. This would support a unified model of support that integrates existing evidence-based and promising practices.

Conclusion

Employment consultants are essential players in increasing the employment participation and economic self-sufficiency of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This study provides a model of support for employment consultants and other stakeholders who assist job seekers. Research, policy, training, and program management need to ensure that employment consultants have the tools to implement the effective employment support practices described in this model of support.
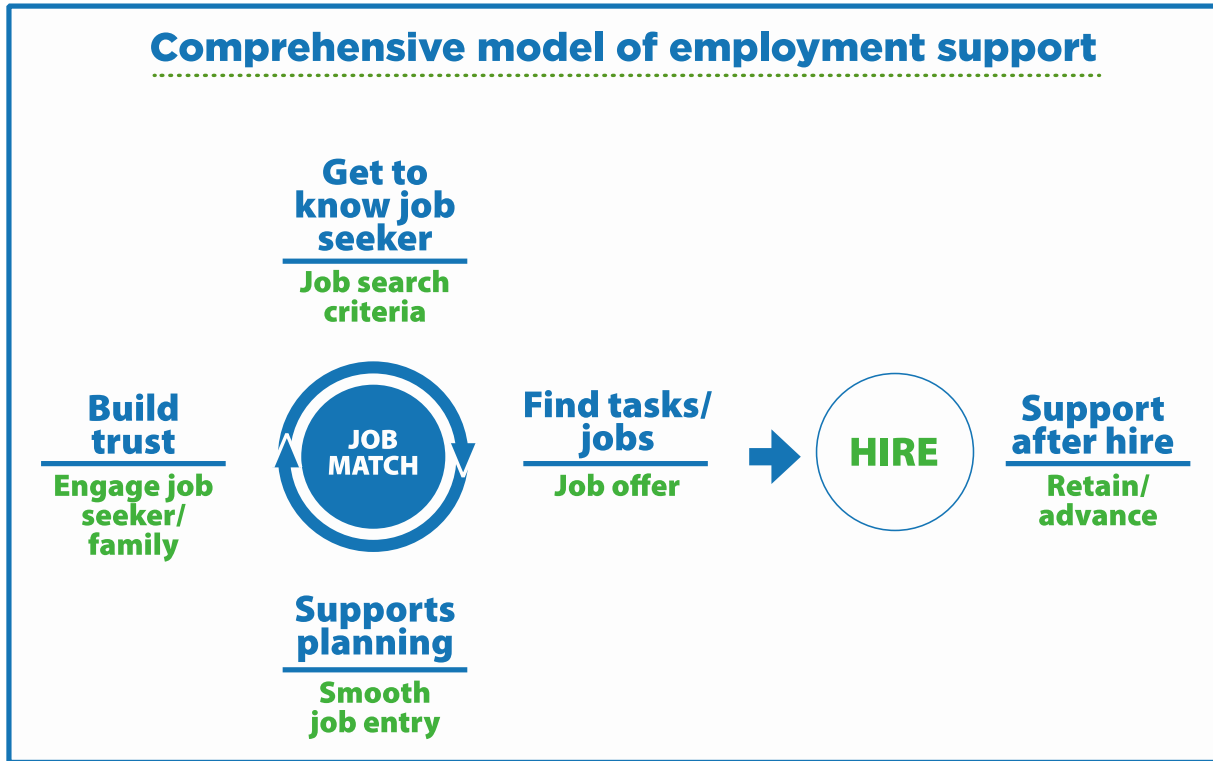
Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

	Employment consultants		Supervisors		Job seekers		Family members	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender								
Male	4	31%	2	14%	8	57%	2	25%
Female	9	69%	12	86%	6	43%	6	75%
Total	13	100%	14	100%	14	100%	8	100%
Race								
White	9	69%	13	93%	10	71%	na	na
Black or African American	2	15%	1	7%	3	21%	na	na
Asian	2	15%	0	0%	0	0%	na	na
Other	0	0%	0	0%	1	7%	na	na
Total	13	100%	14	100%	14	100%	na	na
Ethnicity								
Hispanic or Latino	0	0%	0	0%	1	7%	na	na
Not Hispanic, Not Latino	13	100%	12	100%	13	93%	na	na
Total	13	100%	12	100%	14	100%	na	na
Education								
Some High School	0	0%	0	0%	1	8%	0	0%
High School (diploma)	0	0%	0	0%	10	77%	0	0%
Some College	4	31%	2	14%	1	8%	0	0%
Undergraduate	6	46%	3	21%	1	8%	4	57%
Graduate Degree	3	23%	9	65%	0	0%	3	43%
Total	13	100%	14	100%	13	100%	7	100%

Sources of data: Employment consultants: Online survey completed by the employment consultants after the interview. Job seekers: Online survey completed by employment consultants after the interview. Family members: Phone interview. Supervisors: Online survey completed by supervisors after the interview.

Figure 1. Model of employment supports

Comprehensive model of employment support

Get to know job seeker
Job search criteria

Build trust
Engage job seeker/ family

JOB MATCH

Find tasks/ jobs
Job offer

HIRE

Support after hire
Retain/ advance

Supports planning
Smooth job entry

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