BRINGING EMPLOYMENT FIRST TO SCALE

Strengthening Employment Services for Job Seekers With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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Read this brief to learn how employment consultants who support job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities invest their time.

Introduction

Strengthening the effectiveness of employment services for job seekers with disabilities is key for improving their employment outcomes and their financial self-sufficiency. The purpose of this brief is to examine the quality of employment services available to job seekers with disabilities, and to offer recommendations for improvement. Findings are from a longitudinal study that involved 61 employment consultants in 37 employment programs in 17 states. Data were collected through a survey delivered to the participants' smartphones every work day for one year.

Employment consultants are support professionals who assist job seekers with disabilities to explore, find, secure, and maintain employment. They may also be known as employment specialists, job developers, or business developers.
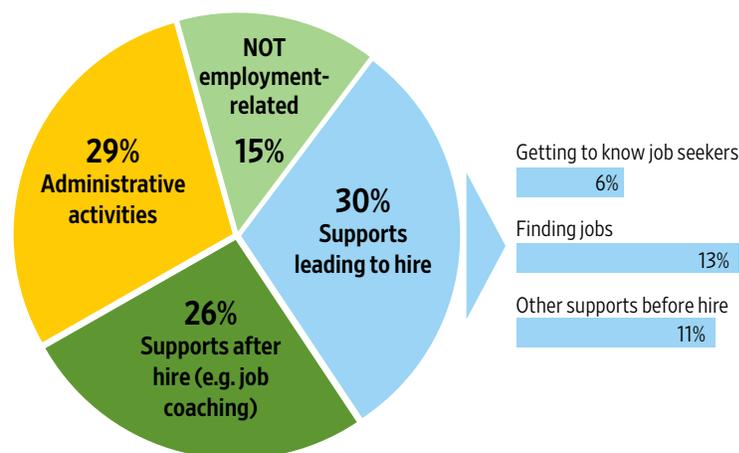
Based on these findings and the literature about effective employment support practices, we recommend that employment consultants be supported to establish a regular review of their time investments, with particular emphasis on:

1. **Increasing time invested in supports that lead to hire**

2. **Spending more time in businesses**

3. **Increasing interactions with employers**

4. **Involving family members of job seekers in the employment process**

1. Increasing time invested in supports that lead to hire

As shown in Figure 1, employment consultants spent about 30% of a typical work day providing supports that lead to hire—the blue zone in the pie chart—corresponding to approximately 2.4 hours a day in an 8-hour work day. This included getting to know job seekers (6%), finding jobs (13%), and providing other supports before hire (11%). The remaining time was spent supporting people after hire (26%), completing administrative activities (29%), and accomplishing non-employment related tasks (15%).

Figure 1. Primary support activities

- 29% Administrative activities
- NOT employment-related 15%
- 30% Supports leading to hire
  - Getting to know job seekers 6%
  - Finding jobs 13%
  - Other supports before hire 11%
- 26% Supports after hire (e.g. job coaching)

Providing supports that lead to hire—the blue zone in Figure 1—can be demanding, particularly when job seekers have limited work experience and employers are unfamiliar with hiring staff with disabilities. Investing a larger share of time in the blue zone could make the difference in strengthening the quality of employment support services. This is

because more time in the blue zone would mean more opportunities for employment consultants to repeat tasks and, therefore, getting better at performing them.

For example, by spending more time observing job seekers in workplaces—situational assessment—employment consultants would improve their ability to more quickly and accurately assess job seekers' skills and preferences to inform their job search. Similarly, by doing more business tours—a recommended approach for learning about businesses—employment consultants would improve their ability to analyze job tasks, spot job-carving opportunities, and negotiate new job descriptions. In general, employment consultants who spend a larger share of their time providing the core supports leading to hire are likely to be exposed to a larger variety of challenges and opportunities and, therefore, expand their portfolios of solutions when issues arise.

Given the fixed amount of time available in a work day, increasing the time invested in supports that lead to hire may require decreasing time in other areas. Teams need to assess the effectiveness of strategies being used for each of the other support activities against best practice guidelines. Here are a few suggestions.

Optimize supports after hire.
The employment consultants in this study reported spending about a quarter of their day in supports after hire. Supports after hire are important for ensuring job retention and career advancement. At the same time, optimizing supports after hire could free up time for supporting other job seekers.

Supports after hire could be optimized by planning for it from day one, when a job seeker walks in the door of an employment program. For example, getting to know a job seeker and searching for jobs that more closely match the job seeker's skills and preferences are likely to lead to greater job satisfaction, better job performance, and thus less need for intense supports after hire. Another strategy is searching for jobs in businesses that have positive cultures. These businesses are more likely to allow for natural supports from co-workers, an effective practice known for reducing the need for professional supports after hire. Another positive effect of promoting natural supports after hire—when possible—is greater social inclusion of workers with disabilities within their work environments, which in turn leads to greater job satisfaction, greater job retention, and less need for intense supports.

Streamline administrative tasks.
The employment consultants spent almost a third of their work days on administrative tasks, including handling service authorizations, billing, and reporting; completing forms, case notes, and other documentation; or attending meetings. It would be important to reflect on how to simplify administrative tasks, including minimizing unnecessary paperwork, increasing the use of technology—e.g., adopting mobile devices, using software for billing and authorizations—and mastering time management strategies.
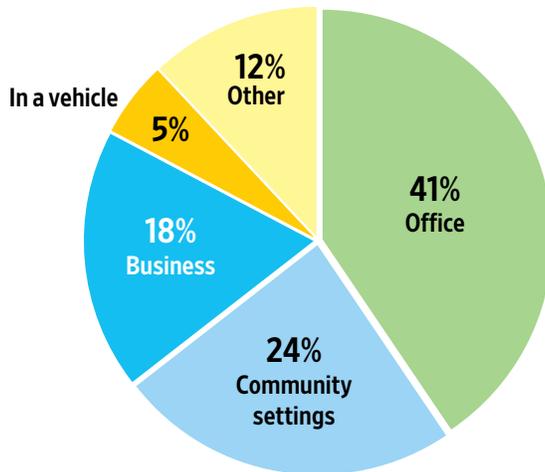
Address non-employment supports.
Employment consultants spent about 15% of their days in tasks that were not directly related to employment. Some of these tasks could be delegated to other professional staff, and the time saved could be invested in providing supports that lead to hire.

Increasing time investment in supports that lead to hire is not necessarily sufficient without a reflection about the quality of the supports provided. The next sections examine the quality of supports by looking at where supports were provided and who the interactions were with while providing services that lead to hire.

2. Spending more time in businesses

As Figure 2 shows, 18% of the time dedicated to providing supports that lead to hire—the blue zone in Figure 1—was spent while in businesses. This corresponds to an estimated 26 minutes/day. Other settings included the employment consultants' offices (41%), community settings (24%), a vehicle (5%), and other (12%).

Figure 2. Settings for supports leading to hire

I always like to ask for a tour of the business because I think a lot of times as an employment specialist you see things through different eyes than maybe a business person would. And so through those tours, I often see things that I would ask, "Okay, well, who does this task, who does that task?" You know, "There's a lot of boxes over here. What's all that about, and what are you doing with that? Who's putting those boxes together," for example? "Who's putting these packets together?" You know, so I'm able to get a real feel for the business.
(Employment consultant)

Spending time in workplaces is positive. It indicates that employment consultants are more likely to implement practices recommended in the literature, including situational assessments, informational interviews, business tours, or job negotiations. These experiences are beneficial for job seekers, employment consultants, and employers as well.

» Situational assessment can help to discover strengths and support needs that otherwise might be overlooked. A more accurate understanding of job seekers' characteristics is critical for improving the quality of job matches, thus reducing the need for support after hire, increasing job satisfaction, and ensuring greater job retention.

» Situational assessment, informational interviews, and business tours can help job seekers with improving their social skills, becoming more familiar with workplaces, getting a feeling for different work cultures, interacting with people in a work setting, and ultimately learning about themselves and their professional goals. These are important

competencies for job seekers to find quality job matches.

» Spending more time in businesses has advantages for employment consultants as well. For example, facilitating informational interviews and business tours may help employment consultants with expanding their expertise and understanding of business operations, work flow, task distribution, and business culture. Greater expertise in these areas is key for creating, carving, or negotiating new job descriptions when existing jobs do not fit job seekers' characteristics.

» Finally, having job seekers spend time in businesses for informational interviews or tours helps employers too. It gives employers an opportunity to get to know job seekers and learn about disability and diversity without the pressure of having to hire. This approach is effective for getting more employers to consider job seekers with disabilities when later job openings emerge.

Another indicator of quality support services refers to who the interactions are with while providing supports leading to hire. The next section examines interactions with employers and with family members.

3. Increasing interactions with employers

As Figure 3 shows, 29% of the time in the blue zone was spent interacting with business personnel including employers, supervisors or workers for an estimated 42 minutes/day.

> *…businesses aren't going to come to us. We have to go to where they are. So we're a member of a group of small business organizations…And we're not just a member, we actually go and participate. We host the event…*
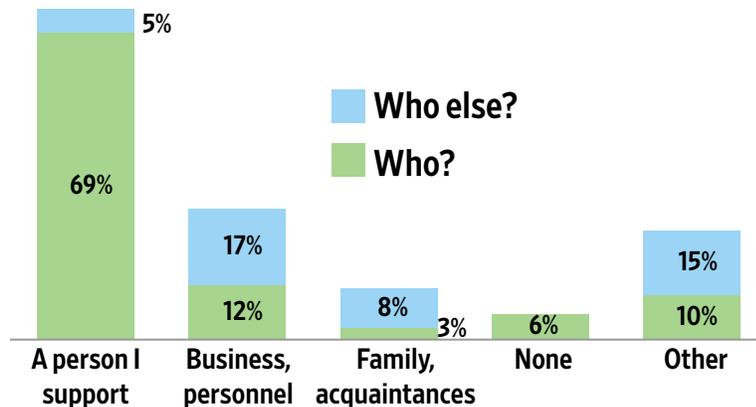> *(Employment consultant)*

This included 12% of time reported as a primary interaction and an additional 17% reported as a secondary interaction ("Who?" and "Who else?" in Figure 3). The importance of interactions with business personnel—especially employers—includes the following:

» It expands the employment consultants' professional networks, which is key for increasing the number and quality of job matches and, in turn, for improving job seekers' satisfaction and job retention.

» It helps employment consultants to quickly understand employers' needs and master business language. These are important skills for gaining employers' trust and thus finding or negotiating a wider array of new jobs.

» Finally, it increases visibility, reputation, and trust of the employment consultants within the business community. This makes it more likely that employers will reach out to the employment consultants when job openings arise.

4. Involving family members of job seekers in the employment process

Finally, as shown in Figure 3, 11% of the time in the blue zone was spent interacting with job seekers' family members or acquaintances, corresponding to an estimated 16 minutes/day. This included 3% reported as primary interaction ("Who?") and 8% reported as a secondary interaction ("Who else?").

Figure 3. Time interacting with key players while providing supports that lead to hire

Involving families is important for a number of reasons:

» Families have a lifetime of experiences with the job seekers and can provide a perspective about strengths, challenges, preferences, etc. that employment consultants are unlikely to get elsewhere.

> *… we ask who they [families] know, who are they connected with, who are the families, who do the families know? And you'd be surprised, when you ask that question, families are very connected. So it's really a very helpful tool to just kind of see who's out there and can they give us an entrée into that particular business?*
> *(Employment consultant)*

» Families and acquaintances can expand the networks of employers—and job openings—beyond the circle of an employment consultant's professional connections.

» Families and acquaintances can connect with employers who already know the job seekers and, therefore, could help with facilitating natural supports after hire.

» Finally, some families can provide emotional and social support, help prepare for job interviews, network for job leads, help with transportation, contribute to problem solving, and spot potential challenges at the workplace that otherwise could threat job retention.

Strategies for involving families include inviting them to formal and informal meetings, copying them on relevant email correspondence, and making phone calls to check in and hear if they have any feedback, ideas, or potential contacts to share.

Conclusion

This brief emphasizes the importance of employment consultants and their teams adopting a reflective approach to practice that includes regular review, critical assessment of how the team is using time overall, and discussion of whether the balance meets the needs of individuals they support. This brief offered several recommendations, including increasing the share of time that employment consultants spend in providing supports that lead to hire, increasing the share of time spent in businesses, prioritizing interactions with employers, and involving job seekers' family members whenever relevant.

While these recommendations may not apply to all situations in which employment consultants operate, they serve as a broad guide. We hope that these ideas will help strengthen employment services for job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and will contribute to improving these job seekers' employment outcomes.

References

Migliore, A., Butterworth, J., Lyons, O., Nye-Lengerman, K., & Foos, P. (In press.) Supporting employment consultants in their work with job seekers: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation.*

Migliore, A., Nye-Lengerman, K., Lyons, O., Bose, J., & Butterworth, J. (2018). A model of employment supports for job seekers with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 84*(2), 3–13.

Method

The data described in this brief were collected from 61 employment consultants in 37 programs in 17 states. Participants completed a short survey every work day, each day at a different random time, between June 1, 2016 and May 30, 2017, on their smartphones. The survey asked the employment consultants to report on their primary activities during the 30 minutes before receipt of a text message: a) what was the primary activity, b) who was the interaction with, and c) where did the activity take place?

The employment consultants were recruited through a call for participation disseminated through the mailing list of the Association of People Supporting EmploymentFirst (APSE). The eligibility criteria included (a) one year or more of experience providing direct support services to job seekers with disabilities, leading to paid individual employment; (b) full-time work hours; (c) 50% or more of caseloads included job seekers with intellectual disabilities; (d) one or more job seekers were employed with a paid individual job with the employment consultant's primary supports during the year before the study; (e) willingness to use a smartphone for the research study.

A total of 97 employment consultants enrolled, and 61 of them participated throughout the one-year duration of the study (retention rate 63%). The completion of the daily survey ranged from 65% to 100% (mean=90%, n=61). Of the participants who abandoned the project, 18 left because they changed jobs, and 18 did not provide any specific reasons or contact was lost. More about this study is available in Migliore, Butterworth, Lyons, Nye-Lengerman, & Foos (in press).

The recommendations and quotes in this brief emerged from a qualitative study with interviews with 16 employment consultants nominated for their effectiveness in supporting job seekers with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Interviews also were carried out with the employment consultants' supervisors, job seekers who found jobs with support from the employment consultants, and job seekers' family members. For more about this study, see Migliore, Nye-Lengerman, Lyons, Bose, & Butterworth (2018).

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Acknowledgements

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