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Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston, "Research to Practice: Effective Customer Service Delivery in Employment Support: Finding a Common Ground Between Guided and Self-Directed Service Delivery" (2001). *Research to Practice Series, Institute for Community Inclusion*. 26. https://scholarworks.umb.edu/ici_researchtopractice/26

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Effective Customer Service Delivery in Employment Support: Finding a Common Ground between Guided and Self-Directed Service Delivery

by Doris Hamner, Jennifer Bose, & Jaimie Ciulla Timmons

Introduction

Two trends are currently exerting significant pressure on employment supports. The consolidation and refocusing of generic employment supports under the Workforce Investment Act and the development of One-Stop Centers highlight the need for these services to be welcoming to all individuals. At the same time, disability-specific initiatives such as the Presidential Task Force, Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act, and the amendments to the Vocational Rehabilitation Act have strengthened the emphasis on employment as an outcome in disability-specific service systems.

The Institute for Community Inclusion conducted a study in the Fall of 1999, examining the experiences of individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts as they used state service systems for help in finding employment. This report focuses on the characteristics of effective services at the system level based on the experiences of individuals who were successful in finding employment. Consumers were active recipients of services and shaped their experiences based on their own actions and strategies.

Methodology and Participants

Seventeen adults with disabilities participated in this study. Each had used a generic or disability-specific agency to help them in the job search process.

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).

Participant demographics varied according to age, racial/ethnic background and type of disability and are described in Table 1.

Data was collected through interviews that were in-depth, semi-structured, and conducted on an individual basis. Interview questions focused on individuals' perspectives on the support

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Gender	
Male	9
Female	8
Age	
20-29	2
30-39	6
40-49	9
Racial/Ethnic Background	
African-American	4
Caucasian	10
Latino/Hispanic	1
Other	2
Level of Education	
None (institutionalized)	1
Some high school	3
High school degree	4
Some college	4
College degree	3
Masters Degree	2
Type of disability	
Physical	3
Mental Illness	8
Sensory Impairment	3
Cognitive	5
Learning	1
Agency Used	
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission	10
Department of Mental Retardation	3
Department of Mental Health	3
One-Stop Center	7
Commission for the Blind	1

Note: several of the participants described themselves as having multiple disabilities and had also used multiple systems; thus the numbers do not add up to 17.

they received from state service systems. More specifically, job seekers 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.

Findings

Agency services varied from providing a guided experience to requiring a high level of self-direction

The study participants encountered distinct differences in the agencies' overall approach to providing help in securing employment. Consumers who sought help from disability-specific agencies experienced a more guided approach; they 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, through the search, until consumers were placed in jobs and were receiving post-placement support. Consumers who received services from One-Stop Centers were helped in a more self-directed manner; they were quickly oriented to the centers by staff members, provided a short appointment with a counselor, and presented with an

array of workshops, library resources, and opportunities to meet employers and network with other consumers. Their time at the One-Stops was their own to plan, with very little direction.

Although disability-specific and generic agencies emphasized one form of service delivery over the other, they offered similar

One-Stop Centers also offer different levels of services to fit the needs of the individual. The core services of the One-Stop are self-directed and are open to all clients. The centers also provide two other levels of services: intensive services and Individual Training Accounts. These services are only available to those individuals who meet eligibility requirements.

help with career development and the job search. Specifically, they offered help with such job-searching skills as resume writing and interviewing and offered workshops on these topics.

The guided and self-directed approaches encountered by the job seekers existed on either end of a continuum of services provided by the various state agencies, with each agency's approach to service delivery experienced by consumers as closer to one end or the other.

Job seekers who were effective self advocates were able to shape their experience with agencies to find an effective place on the continuum between guided and self-directed.

Our findings indicate that although there were two general approaches to service delivery available, it was the consumers who tailored the service to fit their needs, through the skills, background and personal characteristics they brought to the job search. For example, at the disability-specific agencies, some individuals created 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, consumers increased the level of guidance in the One-Stop Centers 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.

Table 2

	Guided	Self-Directed
What the Approaches Offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individualized job search support, exploration and guidance Assessment of skills and interests Access to, and advocacy on behalf of clients, to employers Post placement supports including job coaching Assistance of counselor who provides job search and job retention advice, suggestions, moral support and follow-through until the job selection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources to build job searching skills including resume and interviewing workshops A higher expectation of a job-seeker's ability to set employment-related goals, evaluate skills and interests, and research occupations and job leads Tools to find employment independently including computers, fax machines, and employment openings Job seeker has the initiative and the decision making power at every stage of the job-search process
Consumer's Influence on Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consumers create more opportunities for self-direction by approaching counselors with particular requests for help Consumers who bring focused goals create specialized opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consumers increase the level of guidance received by consulting counselors more frequently and attending more workshops Consumers can create opportunities by approaching staff with specific requests

Study participants experiencing help from agencies that emphasized either guidance or self-direction described both positive and negative aspects to each approach. Below are their descriptions as our findings indicate.

Advantages of the Guided Approach:

- Consumers who were not clear about their job search goals, skills or interests benefited from a counselor's assistance. This approach typically incorporates a formal or informal assessment that could lead to more promising job matches.
- The individualized services of the guided approach, such as a discussion of disclosure or other sensitive issues with a counselor, as well as being shown individually how to use resources and adaptive equipment at the agency, was helpful to consumers.
- Consumers improved their chances at finding employment by practicing mock interviews and getting assistance in writing resumes. The consumers could then present themselves to potential employers in ways that improved their chances of finding employment.

Limitations of the Guided Approach:

- If the consumers had limited involvement in the job search, they had little opportunity to prepare to conduct a future job search more independently. Consumers ran the risk of becoming disconnected from the job search process if their counselors moved from providing help with communication to actually writing resumes and cover letters, in addition to handling all pre- and post-employment contact with employers.

Advantages of the Self-Directed Approach:

- Access to job search techniques and strategies and access to the tools for conducting an independent job search including copy machines, faxes, word processors, on-line access, and printers were helpful to self-directed job seekers.
- The self-directed approach to service delivery could be very powerful because of the level of initiative job seekers could exercise in researching career fields and open positions and following up on job leads.

Limitations of the Self-Directed Approach:

- Many job seekers indicated that they were unable to use agency resources fully due to inexperience with the job search process and/or the need for more job exploration. Some also reported a limited understanding of computers and using the Internet to find employment. Although agencies offered the

technological tools, the job seeker was responsible for figuring out how to use them.

- Job seekers reported limited orientation to the agency's services and procedures. While these agencies store a large amount of important information, consumers were likely to be somewhat lost and confused if their orientation to agency resources was too cursory. One consumer specified an orientation that assessed the quality of the match between the agency and the individual:

"Not just an orientation as to this is what we provide but an orientation of the agency to you. What are your needs and can we meet them here... if they have those resources or services available that they could just make the connection for you."

Implications

Individual experiences of service delivery systems reflect a range of techniques and ideas about the best ways to help job-seekers. Agency services leaned either in the direction of the guided approach many people found at the disability-specific agencies or the self-directed approach of the One-Stop Centers. Individuals and agencies need to identify strategies that find the correct balance of guidance and self-direction for each individual.

As disability-specific agencies and the One-Stop system begin to collaborate, they have an opportunity to bring the strongest aspects of both approaches together to use as best practices in serving consumers. These practices from each approach often complement one another; the detailed assessment from the guided approach, for example, could lead a participant to elect to attend particular workshops and initiate more of the job search independently, as is done in the self-directed approach. A consolidated job service delivery system that offers such a range of beneficial options has room to develop enough flexibility to ensure that when visiting each agency, individual consumers with and without disabilities find the amount and type of help best suited to their needs. The challenge for both types of agencies, as they change and consolidate, is not only to fulfill conditions of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), but to determine the strengths each partnering agency possesses that will allow them to collaborate successfully while accomplishing WIA's goals. The following implications suggest ways for collaborators to provide informed, efficient services to people with disabilities as they work together to create change.

All Agencies

Focus on flexibility in service delivery to ensure that services are tailored to meet consumer needs

- Emphasize consumer assessment by training staff to explore the needs of all consumers regardless of disability
- Offer a job skills workshop for people with and without disabilities on discussing job accommodations with employers

Provide a clear path to intensive or guided services so consumers feel comfortable asking for additional help.

- Create environments in which all consumers feel safe advocating for their unique needs if they choose by providing such accommodations as appropriate signs and welcoming front-end staff
- Ensure that consumers are welcome to bring up special needs related to learning style, physical accessibility, mental health concerns or other issues. This can be part of the orientation process early on, re-visited at workshops, or noted through environmental cues in the agency, such as well-worded signs

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the participants in this study who discussed their experiences with us. This brief also reflects the contributions of John Butterworth, Kimberlee Hartley, David Hoff, and Jennifer Schuster of the ICI.

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Build job seeker competence and self-determination

Consumers benefiting from guided supports should be better able to manage their own job search and career decisions in the future. Systems can:

- Empower clients by teaching job search techniques rather than simply showing or doing for them
- Foster self-determination by encouraging consumer choice-making and involvement in all stages of the job search process
- Educate consumers, through workshops resource lists, about the needs agencies can meet and the best ways to communicate with agency personnel about problems, questions, changes and goals in service delivery

One-Stop Centers

- Become aware of the services and resources each agency partner can provide to the other and to consumers
- Present and describe current services offered by each agency during meetings of state and regional workforce development boards
- Engage in discussions of service provision and coordination at these meetings so that agencies' roles can be clarified, gaps in service provision can be filled, and service duplication can be reduced
- Compile resource lists and descriptions of available services, especially for use by counselors and consumers

This is a publication of the Center on State Systems & Employment (RRTC) at the Institute for Community Inclusion which is funded, in part, by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research of the US Dept. of Education under grant no. H133B980037. The opinions in this publication are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Dept. of Education.



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