

BRINGING EMPLOYMENT FIRST TO SCALE

Writing for Families: Tips to Increase the Impact of Training Materials

By Jennifer Bose and John Kramer

Key Findings
from the RRTC
on Advancing
Employment

Introduction

Families can be the most influential factor in successful employment and life planning for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), often leading them on the path to employment by serving as role models for work ethic and behavior (Lee & Carter, 2012; Lindstrom et al., 2013; Timmons et al., 2011). Yet families often lack the knowledge to move employment from an abstract belief to a real job (Kramer, Bose, & Winsor, 2018).

The high level of commitment and support offered by many family members to people with IDD in employment is acknowledged and well-documented in the research literature. Family members' having developed a vision and expectation of employment is clearly linked to employment outcomes (Francis, Gross, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2015). However, the vision family members form and the expectations they set for employment are largely shaped by their access to information about community employment options. In turn, the quality and quantity of this information depends to a great extent on their experiences engaging with systems that serve people with IDD (Bianco & Garrison-Wade, 2009).

Federal mandates have supported state service systems' efforts to increase employment for people with IDD (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014) and the educational and vocational rehabilitation (VR) systems have developed useful tools to educate individuals with IDD and their families about how to navigate the supports and services available to them (Francis et al., 2015; Molfenter et al., 2018; Thomas & Robbins-Cureau, 2010). These trainings have provided information and changed families' level of knowledge about employment possibilities, job search strategies, job accommodations, and benefits planning. They have been found to raise families' expectations that people with IDD can become employed in their communities, and to increase the likelihood that families will engage in future planning for their members with IDD (Burke, Arnold, & Owen, 2018).

Several trainings have also included skill-building opportunities for individuals with IDD to engage in volunteer or paid work experiences (Hamm et al., 2014; Sabatino & Macrine, 2007). One training for family members interested in advocacy has taught them to reach out to service professionals, people with IDD, employers, and others in

This brief covers some of the lessons learned in reviewing literature designed to engage with families about employment. It suggests some tips and strategies to use with families to increase effective involvement and collaboration.

their communities to meet for group conversations and planning to expand employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Trainor, Carter, Swedeen, & Pickett, 2012).

However, many more families need services and training than receive them (Burke et al., 2018), so the benefits offered by these trainings have not yet bridged the persistent gap in information and services for many families. Our research points to factors that the disability service system might address to keep families engaged and well informed about the employment process. This brief presents tips and recommendations to develop materials that inform people with IDD and their families.

Where did our findings come from?

We conducted a study of gray literature – materials written by service providers for families – to understand what would make it more readable from the perspective of people with IDD and their families. Two of our research team members, an individual with IDD and a family member, used online databases and program websites to collect gray literature, including info briefs, resource guides, brochures, handbooks, infographics and journals.

We used these questions as a guide in reviewing the literature:

- » Do resources exist to inform individuals and families about employment?
- » Are existing resources accessible to individuals and families developing an employment vision?
- » Can existing resources effectively support individuals and families to move from an employment vision to an employment outcome?

Discussion

The literature we reviewed for this study ranged from brochures describing specific programs and services to journal articles describing training opportunities for people with IDD, family members, and service professionals. These materials contain a wealth of ideas, advice, and suggestions that can at least help people understand how to work with

Recommendations for creating effective training materials

A key conclusion from our literature search is that there are many resources for individuals and families focused on employment in the community for people with IDD; the issue appears, rather, to be one of information overload. From our work, we think future publications should focus less on being comprehensive and more on being targeted, relevant, and to the point to grab and hold people's attention.

Here are some guidelines we have developed:

Use plain language in multiple formats.

- » Use straightforward, plain speech as much as possible. Avoid complex, highly technical terminology.
 - **For example, instead of writing “technical assistance and capacity-building services,” write “services to help the agency serve people better.” Instead of writing “our goal is to improve employment outcomes,” write “we want to help people get jobs.”**
- » Get the word out more broadly to many people with IDD and their families by making documents available in languages other than English, or other formats such as audio and Braille.

Focus on brevity and clarity of message.

- » Address individuals and families clearly at the beginning of any documents meant for them. Lay out the documents to make information easy to find. Use stories, infographics, and images to make the main points of a document clear.
- » Break down complex ideas into sequential steps and complicated documents into smaller, simpler ones.
- » Include a “call to action” in the document. This is a statement that encourages people to connect in person or through social media for further support.

Reach out to a wide range of families.

- » Make sure that resources address the needs of people with specific disabilities within the population with IDD. For example, the needs of people with “hidden” disabilities will be different from those of people whose disabilities are more apparent. People with more than one disability may have different needs from those with one disability.
- » Ensure that resources address the challenges experienced by people due to cultural factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. These factors can also affect access to employment supports and services for people with disabilities. For example, materials for people who live in rural communities should take into account that the nearest Vocational Rehabilitation office might be a great distance away.

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