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# Achieving Best Practice in Employment Supports: Defining Measures of Effectiveness (Bringing Employment First to Scale, Issue No. 4)

ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston

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## BRINGING EMPLOYMENT FIRST TO SCALE

# Achieving Best Practice in Employment Supports: Defining Measures of Effectiveness

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are among the most likely Americans to be unemployed, live in poverty, or rely on public programs.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, only 23% of working-age people with cognitive disabilities—a broad demographic category that includes individuals with IDD—were employed, compared to 72% of people without disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

While over 30 states have adopted an Employment First policy (a declaration that employment is the priority outcome for people with disabilities), a key challenge is ensuring that supports meet the standards for best practice. Employment supports are delivered by what we refer to as “employment consultants.” We use this term to describe staff who support individuals with disabilities to find and keep an individual integrated job in the community. Other titles may include employment specialist, job developer, or job coach.

## What do we know about employment supports?

The successful employment of job seekers depends in large part on the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employment consultants to develop, match, and support jobs that meet both the job seeker’s and the employer’s interests and needs.<sup>3</sup> The literature defines a number of research-based and promising practices in employment supports, including person-centered career planning and assessment,<sup>4</sup> customized employment,<sup>5</sup> workplace culture analysis,<sup>6</sup> using personal and professional networks,<sup>7</sup> and building and ensuring natural supports.<sup>8</sup>

However, studies suggest these practices may be inconsistently used in the field. One study found employment consultants had only limited experience with investing in discovery or career planning, spending time with individuals in community settings, working with families, and negotiating job responsibilities with an employer.<sup>9</sup> Minimal opportunities for effective professional development, including both formal and informal chances for learning, may contribute to this disconnect.<sup>10</sup> However, employment consultants who receive appropriate training and mentorship to implement these strategies in their work improve the number and quality of the jobs they develop.<sup>11</sup>

### This brief:

- » Shares what we know about bringing best practice to scale.
- » Introduces a line of research that builds a strategy for an effective workforce for employment supports.

### PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYMENT CONSULTANTS PERFORMING THESE JOB SEARCH ACTIVITIES FOR MOST OR ALL JOB SEEKERS OR IN THE PAST THREE MONTHS

Reviewed classified ads	53%
Made cold calls to employers	53%
Approached past employers	53%
Attended business events*	51%
Asked employers about related businesses	39%
Involved family members or acquaintances	34%
Knocked on doors of businesses*	33%
Negotiated job descriptions	27%
Searched without referrals in mind*	18%
One-Stop Career Centers	16%

\*In the past three months

Source: Migliore, Hall, Butterworth, and Winsor (2010)

### Employment consultants by the numbers:

- » An estimated 35,000 employment consultants work in over 5,000 community rehabilitation providers
- » About 9% of community rehabilitation provider staff are dedicated to integrated employment<sup>12</sup>
- » The majority of employment consultants assist up to five job seekers with IDD per year with getting jobs.

### How do we bring effective practice to scale?

Training is one pathway to improving performance. Training for employment consultants is available from both state and national resources. Two organizations, APSE (the Association for Person Supporting Employment First) and ACRE (the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators), have created

RRTC on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

A project of

**ThinkWork!**

at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston



comprehensive lists of competencies that employment consultants should possess to perform quality supported employment services, and provide a registry of individuals who have completed that training.

APSE designates individuals who demonstrate knowledge and skills by successfully completing a certification examination as Certified Employment Support Professionals™ (CESP). ACRE approves training providers and curricula based on a defined list of competencies, and identifies individuals who have successfully completed an approved training course and demonstrated competencies through professional development activities. Both APSE and ACRE provide a voluntary pathway to demonstrating competence, although some states are beginning to establish training or certification requirements.

While training employment consultants is a first key step for bringing effective practice to scale, training alone is not enough. A variety of factors, including organizational support for implementation of new knowledge, funding structures, and state and local priorities, have a significant impact on use of effective practices, and thus employment outcomes of job seekers. For example, research shows that involving families is a best practice of effective employment supports. However, a recent study shows only about half of responding employment consultants saw any benefit of engaging families in job development.<sup>13</sup> This suggests a gap at the provider level in effective communication of and support for established strategies that can contribute to employment outcomes.

There are a number of different strategies that can support employment consultants' use of best practices in employment services. Butterworth found that training followed by onsite mentorship to support implementation increased the number of placements, wages, and hours worked for individuals supported by participating employment consultants.<sup>14</sup>

Structured performance feedback is also a critical element. During supervision meetings with employment consultants, questions can be asked to help determine how and when job development best practices are being used. For example, how much time do employment consultants spend...

- » Out of the office?
- » On job development activities?
- » Interacting with businesses?
- » Interacting with job seekers' personal networks?

Other benchmarks could include number of contacts with employers, number of completed job seeker interviews, and strategies used to negotiate job characteristics. These questions can help determine if employment consultants are focusing their efforts on building meaningful connections between job seekers and businesses.

**“Regardless of the job seeker’s level of motivation, skill, experience, attitude, and support system, his or her ability to get a job will often depend on the effectiveness of employment specialists...” (Luecking et al., 2004)**

## What’s next

As we complete qualitative analysis of over 40 interviews with employment consultants, supervisors, job seekers, and family members to understand effective employment support practices, we will present findings back to participants to make sure we “got it right.” Findings will be disseminated through a peer-reviewed manuscript, an online brief, and an implementation guide that describes an integrated employment support model and decision guide for employment consultants.

Findings from this study will inform an intervention with 160 employment consultants from 30 community rehabilitation providers across four states. The intervention will consist of a package of online training, data-based performance feedback, facilitated peer-to-peer learning and support, and distance technical assistance activities administered over a period of 12 months.

## What’s the goal?

- » To strengthen the role of employment consultants by supporting their use of best and promising practices using a combination of online training, regular data-based performance feedback, and peer supports using a virtual community of practice.

## How will we get there?

- » A mixed-method research approach will include a qualitative study and a randomized controlled trial. The qualitative study is exploring the practices of employment consultants recommended for their effectiveness in supporting job seekers with IDD. Interviews have been conducted with 16 employment consultants, their supervisors, job seekers, and family members. Next, a randomized controlled trial will test the effectiveness of an intervention for improving employment outcomes.

## Our research questions:

- » To what extent do activities implemented by employment consultants relate to the approaches described in the literature? How do consultants make decisions about which strategies to use? How are these activities tracked?
- » What is the impact of an integrated approach to training, data-based performance feedback, and peer support on employment consultant use of strategies and employment outcomes?
- » What activities are most effective for increasing the number and quality of employment outcomes? What benchmarks predict better employment outcomes and higher quality employment?

## Sources

- <sup>1</sup> Braddock et al., 2015; Butterworth et al., 2015; Houtenville & Ruiz, 2016  
<sup>2</sup> American Community Survey, 2013.  
<sup>3</sup> Hewitt & Larson, 2007; Migliore et al., 2012.  
<sup>4</sup> Callahan et al., 2009; Kluesner et al., 2005.  
<sup>5</sup> Harvey et al., 2013.  
<sup>6</sup> Butterworth et al., 2000; Carlson et al., 2008.  
<sup>7</sup> Hagner et al., 1996; Owens & Young, 2008; Luecking et al., 2004.  
<sup>8</sup> Becker & Drake, 2003; Test et al., 1998.  
<sup>9</sup> Migliore et al., 2012; Migliore et al., 2010.  
<sup>10</sup> Hall et al., 2014.  
<sup>11</sup> Butterworth et al., 2012.  
<sup>12</sup> Inge et al., 2009.  
<sup>13</sup> Hall et al., 2014.  
<sup>14</sup> Butterworth et al., 2012.

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## What is the RRTC on Advancing Employment?

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) conducts research on state-level policy and practice around integrated employment. In 2014, ICI received a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), to develop the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Advancing Employment for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The purpose of this research is to identify strategies to support state agencies, providers, advocates, individuals and families to make the philosophy of Employment First a reality.

# ThinkWork!

Advancing employment and opportunity for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities

Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is a project of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork! is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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