

Employment First

Building a Culture That Expects Job Success

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This handout is excerpted
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Foundations: Building a Culture That Expects Job Success

What does the phrase *Employment First* really mean? The term is sometimes used loosely in many places. It refers to a relatively new movement to change public policy for individuals with disabilities who receive publicly funded day services. *Employment First* begins as an effort to change the expectations people have about the ability of people with disabilities to work – in policy, in practice, and in person. It refers to having employment be the **primary** expected goal for working-age adults with disabilities in government-funded day services, and for those services to support that realization of that goal.

In truth, like many aspects of disability policy, there is no single defining set of words universally accepted to describe *Employment First*, although there are several associated aspects. Even so, many US states are considering or have established policy initiatives and/or legislation that are labeled as *Employment First*. (See *Appendix*.) On one hand, this is encouraging. On a basic level, it shows the importance many state policymakers place on the employment of people with disabilities. However, policy intentions also have to support the multitude of things that must be in place for any policy to create a reality. And in this instance, an *Employment First* policy has implications for a necessary shift on many levels and with many stakeholders for the intended results to succeed.

Supported employment has had over thirty years of implementation, research, and study and is now considered an evidenced-based practice that produces good outcomes resulting in jobs for people with disabilities. People are placed much quicker, and wages average cumulatively over twice as much more over time than being in a workshop.¹ While supported employment outcomes still can be further improved upon, compare them to facility-based work training. Sheltered workshops have been around for roughly fifty years and have had poor job placement success in terms of percentage of people served. There is a paucity of research-based evidence to validate its practices. In addition, these facilities needlessly segregate hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities from their communities for most of their lives. Given the long-term successes of supported employment, and the corresponding long-term poor outcomes of sheltered employment, one would expect integrated community services naturally would supplant the segregated approach over time.

Yet, the disability field still has been unable to convert a segregated work system. In fact daytime segregation of people with disabilities grows larger each year. And this is despite several decades of substantial system change funding, policy changes, and a slew of new initiatives to convert services. Thus, there needs to be careful consideration of *Employment First* policy development.

Employment First presents a great opportunity, but there is a real concern that new employment initiatives, while well-intentioned, will be developed incompletely and ultimately again will do little to change a largely segregated and entrenched vocational system. That would be a tragedy. *Employment First* is an effort to evolve both outcomes and services in the world of work for people with disabilities. But, advocates for changing the system toward producing real jobs and away from segregation and years of unproductive training are likely to fall short if the principles behind this concept become watered down. Sometimes new ideas end up in policies, but only pay lip service, with few real consequences for inaction. We must avoid having *Employment First* go through a process of misunderstood implementation, leading to an all-too familiar conclusion about new innovations that are perceived as being attempted and falling short, or “*We tried that and it didn’t work...*”

For instance, too often, there is no way even to monitor the results of new policies. *Employment First* policies must include a way to keep track of systems change towards job outcomes and the level of continued segregation, state by state, area by area. They must include incentives for success and consequences for failure.

Here is an example of how a policy can have good intentions but have structural flaws that keep it from fulfilling its goals. A few years ago, a state mandated a multi-year plan to encourage moving individuals with disabilities out of facility-based day programs into employment. It was an ambitious and challenging move for its time. There was some controversy and concern among various stakeholders, but in the end, state leadership controlled the resources, and agencies, many reluctantly, had to follow along. The tracking measures focused on by the state were (a) whether there was an increase in the number of people employed year to year, and (b) the percentage of people who moved from segregated facilities.

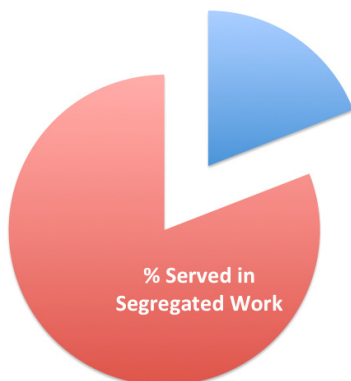
Five years later, there were many new job placements for people with disabilities who previously spent their time in a workshop. Yet, the total day system outcomes and service demographics in this state remained much the same in terms of the *ratio* of people in sheltered facilities versus integrated employment. Why? Because as people moved out of sheltered facilities, new referrals moved in to take their place. Yet, only the people who moved out into employment were accountable to the initiative. But because of wait lists, financial disincentives, and increasing demand for “day services,” many segregated facilities actually *expanded* during this time. So while integrated employment outcomes looked positive and were increasing, the numbers of people served in segregated settings increased at roughly the same rate. In the end, all you had was pretty much the same system, only larger.

This example, while it resulted in people getting job opportunities, is not a successful *Employment First* policy. To actually change the system, we must commit to not only expanding integrated employment and building capacity, but also to promoting informed choice, reducing segregated options, and building incentives to achieve a well-matched job.

To truly understand *Employment First* and its implications, it is important to begin with the idea of what disability services should be about. At its core, *Employment First* is part of a greater movement related to self-determination, normalization, person-centered planning, and integrated residential and employment life. These notions redefine what it means to have a disability in our society. They represent a moving away from an obsolete set of choices rooted in protective care, to a priority of personal fulfillment and responsibility. Technologies associated with supported living and supported employment, in particular, have helped people with disabilities to receive support both within and as part of communities as they learn and live their lives.

In the traditional approach to disability services, people with disabilities are people with vulnerabilities first, and require professional intervention, caretaking, and sheltered training. Ultimately, this creates service structures that cause people with disabilities to lead a life apart. In a segregated training system, people who attend them have been excused, and many would argue prevented, from typical cultural expectations. This has not been by their own asking, but as a result of professional judgment. Typical life milestones, such as graduating high school, going to post-secondary school, having a home of one's own, or holding a job and earning wages to support oneself, have eluded far too many people with disabilities based on this traditional model.

It is only after we understand the meaning and scope of the needed shift in expectations that we can begin to understand what *Employment First* really means and how it challenges our current system. Right now, most people with disabilities who enter services are al-



most universally assessed and considered in need of readiness training in order to eventually participate in community life. Sadly, this has a large impact on employment. For example, according to national surveys, only about 21% of nearly one million people with developmental disabilities are currently served in supported or competitive employment. And many of these individuals are not employed as an individual worker, but are in a “group” employment model. ²

The problem that continues to perpetuate a segregated work system is the fact that most individuals with disabilities newly

entering the disability service system still continue to enter segregated facilities. Supported employment was introduced nationally in the early eighties. After years of advocacy and work on systems change toward an integrated work system, by 1990 the number of individuals entering the system in a jobs-based program was about equal to the same number of people entering into a segregated system. This was a hopeful statistic. But, over the next ten years, the flow reversed back to a predominantly segregated entry pattern of about 80% segregated training, about where it is today. Additionally, service dollars follow the same pattern. About \$0.80 of every state and federal rehabilitation dollar spent for day program and employment services in state developmental service systems across the US support segregated services.³

One reason for this is that despite evidence to the contrary, most rehabilitation professionals still believe people with disabilities need workshops in order to experience employment. As evidence, in one survey of a nationwide sample of community rehabilitation professionals 87% stated that facility-based programs are needed to provide employment opportunities to individuals who have difficulty or are unable to maintain employment in community jobs. The same percentage also stated that “there will always be some individuals with disabilities in my organization who will need to have facility-based employment.”⁴

What does research say? Well, in a recent survey of data from the Rehabilitation Services Administration, the work outcomes of two groups of nearly 10,000 workers with disabilities were directly compared.⁵ They were matched by primary and secondary disabilities and gender. The two major findings are of interest:

- Participation in sheltered workshops *reduces* hours of work and the amount of wages for people with disabilities.
- Policymakers can substantially reduce the cost of supported employment by not having individuals with disabilities go to sheltered workshops.

Further, what about costs? The cumulative costs of supported employment actually are much lower than the cumulative costs generated by sheltered employees (in one study, \$6,618 versus \$19,388). Further the costs of supported employment decline over time, while those of sheltered workshops increase.⁶

It is important to realize the implications of this. Every work day, nearly one million people with disabilities spend time in a day training program, such as a sheltered workshop, that is found to be significantly less cost-effective in gaining employment. This is nothing less than a national disgrace – a waste of public funds and a great loss of life opportunity for people with disabilities.

Most likely the most challenging point of this manual on *Employment First* is its position to publicly acknowledge that the segregated nature of much of the disability vocational training system to date has not only failed to produce good job outcomes for people with disabilities, but also has acted at times as an obstacle to people with disabilities leading fulfilling lives. Facility-based sheltered work has been a barrier by adding stigma to its workers, paying predominantly sub-minimum wages, and wasting time and resources that could be spent in actual employment. In addition, service components of much of disability job training, such as intrusive behavior management, labeling, and other artifacts of the human services system, have created further barriers to job success.

Politically, many agencies, including national associations, have tried to focus on growing integrated services as a strategy for change. One noted, “*We believe that the best strategy ...is to focus on developing more jobs, as well as the programs, services, and supports that people with I/DD need ... The employment and services marketplace will evolve accordingly and unwanted employment options will fade from the scene.*”⁷ Unfortunately, twenty years of employment outcome data has shown that this has not proven sufficient. Segregated facilities are entrenched and growing larger in the numbers of people served every day.

We need to acknowledge that this must change. **This begins by recognizing that the segregated, facility-based approach will not simply fade away.** There needs to be agency commitments to immediately **end new referrals** to segregated models and, secondly, put in place strategies to **downsize facility-based models over a reasonable time span.** Employment services must revolve around integration, and our supports themselves must be based on enhancing the supports that are natural in work environments. The promise of real employment for people with disabilities remains unfulfilled. And today, for every person who enters an integrated employment program, four more enter a segregated work one.

In short, *Employment First* requires a partnership with job seekers with disabilities, their families, employers, disability providers, government, and the community. In this manual, I hope to cover the key concerns for not only a successful *Employment First* policy, but also how to implement such a policy at the service provider and local community level. We will look at six domains: Expectations, Technical Capacity, Families and Job Seekers, Community and Policy, Leadership, Staff, and Organization. Each of these is covered in more detail in the rest of this manual.

1. **Expectations:** Do all the key stakeholders, especially people with disabilities and their families, have a clear expectation of employment as a goal from their participation in day services?

2. **Technical Capacity:** What are the capacities of an agency to provide quality supported employment services. This asks the question: how are employment services delivered, and do they meet current quality expectations?
3. **Families and Job Seekers with Disabilities:** How well are families and the individuals served provided information for “informed choice” and incorporated into the job seeking and support process?
4. **Policies and Community:** What are the relationships within the community and do they policies, strategies, and funding prioritize integrated employment?
5. **Leadership:** Does the leadership inspire and motivate others toward a mission of full employment for people with disabilities?
6. **Staff:** Has the agency organized itself to be efficient in its support of jobs and career development? Are the staffing patterns and resources utilized in effective ways?
7. **Organization:** How is the organization structured? Does it have a clear mission and focus on integrated employment services?

¹Kregel & Dean. 2002. *Sheltered vs. supported employment: a direct comparison of long-term earnings outcomes for individuals with cognitive disabilities*. In: Kregel, Dean, Wehman, editors. *Achievements and challenges in employment services for people with disabilities: the longitudinal impact of workplace supports monograph* [Internet]. [cited 2009 June 09] Available from: <http://www.worksupport.com/resources/viewContent.cfm/151>

²United Cerebral Palsy. *Case for Inclusion: 2010. An Analysis of Medicaid for Americans with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*

³Braddock, , Rizzolo, and Hemp, *Most employment services growth in developmental disabilities during 1988–2002 was in segregated settings*, *Mental Retardation* 42(4) (2004), 317–320.

⁴Inge, Wehman, Revell, Erickson, Buterworth & Gilmore. *Survey results from a national survey of community rehabilitation providers holding special wage certificates*. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 30 (2009) 67–85 67

⁵Cimera, *Do Sheltered Workshops Prepare People with Disabilities for Community Employment? Job Training & Placement Report*. Vol. 35, No. 2. February, 2011

⁶Cimera, *The cost-trends of supported employment versus sheltered employment*, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 28 (2008) 15–20IOS

⁷Memo to the Alliance for Full Participation, *The Arc of the United States*, February 21, 2011

