
The Creation of Disability

Kathy Bloom, MS

*Employment Specialist
Wacker Siltronic Corporation
Portland, Oregon*

I am writing this article to express the conviction that social services must share the blame for the high rates of unemployment of the people these services brand as having disabilities. Perhaps I should go further: the social service system must share the blame for the creation of the devastating stereotypes that the general public holds — stereotypes, unfortunately, that guide the actions of employers, too. These convictions come from my personal experiences working within a manufacturing company and subsequently being involved in my community's efforts to initiate supported employment. My company has been credited with maintaining a commitment to hiring people who were believed by professionals to need extensive professional supports. My purpose is to describe the themes that have emerged from the obvious contradictions between the labels and low expectations that accompanied people to employment and our delight in discovering the exaggeration of their disability.

EMPHASIZING DISABILITY

For people with disabilities, the social service system frequently impedes what it is designed to do. When a person depends on a complex, multiple-agency system with myriad complicated regulations to find and keep a job, barriers to employment invariably result. The current social service system responds slowly to business needs, and individual rights are often violated in the process of helping people with disabilities find jobs. What emerges are both legal and ethical issues, such as the common practice of segregating employees who have disabilities from other employees. Seg-

regation and separate pay scales create second-class citizens.

I have said that the social service system must share the blame for the creation of stereotypes that the general public holds, and for the resulting overemphasis on a person's disabilities, rather than abilities. People with disabilities may have greater limitations than many other people, but the social service system makes these limitations larger than life. Disability is created through preconceived ideas, by thinking of people as "disabled" and "limited" rather than by looking at their abilities. It is created through labels and terminology, through a focus on the *dis* of disabilities. Here are some examples of how this has occurred in situations with which I am familiar.

Social Service Focuses on a Person's Limitations

Almost without exception, case managers, service providers, and school representatives have wanted me to explain specifically what disability our employees have, and "how limited" a person could be to be considered for hire. Forgetting for a moment that the Americans With Disabilities Act prohibits me from asking specific questions about a person's disability, I cannot define the nature of a disability or the relationship between job demands and an unknown and perhaps theoretical job applicant with limitations perceived by case managers or school teachers.

When hiring a person who resided in the state institution, we were told by some experts that Bill was too disabled to work in a regular job. He was not considered "ready to leave," had many behavioral problems, and would never "make it" in society or in a job. Perhaps some of his odd mannerisms were the result of 19 years of living in the institution. Neither his labels, which were

of no use to us, nor his history, predicted he would become the excellent employee he is.

Inappropriate Information is Passed to Prospective Employers

When interviewing for a job, we all try to sell ourselves and our abilities. We tell the truth, but we focus on our positive skills and attributes. Caregivers, eager to “sell” the prospective employee, often end up selling problems and limitations. In one instance I was told, “I don’t think you want to hire this person because of her criminal record.” In several instances we were given medical information about individuals. Twice we were handed complete medical files on prospective employees. On one occasion, the hiring supervisor received a medical file without my knowledge. On another, I was told about an applicant’s previous drinking problem. Perhaps the worst experience came in an interaction with a teacher who was hopeful that one of her students would be hired. She stated that this student, Mary, “speaks basic German shepherd.” When asked in disbelief what this meant, the teacher replied, “You know, she only responds to commands like sit, stay, or come here.” Mary now holds a full-time position at our company. In all of these instances, I was given information I could have used to discriminate against an applicant.

Labels Become Barriers: Screening People from Consideration

I have been involved with direct recruitment, hiring, and coordination of support for employees with developmental disabilities. A few years ago, we wanted to hire a person who was not receiving federal, state, or local assistance because of the shortage of funds. Our reasoning was that we did not want caregivers assisting in hiring, training, and supervising our employees, so the funds that were available could be used for someone else. There were known to be 700 people in the area who were on the waiting list for vocational services in our community. During our applicant search, we met with many frustrations, including an amazing lack of applicants. After many delays, we eventually interviewed four applicants, and hired Mary. I was later told that 700 was not a realistic

number because each case manager had to screen out those who were “not appropriate” for work in private industry because they had “severe” disabilities.

Over-Reliance on the Expertise of Professionals

We analyzed our low applicant flow from the time we hired Mary, and discovered two reasons why the number of applicants was so limited. The first was because professionals doubted our intent, and the second was a perception that many individuals would not fit in a business setting. In a discussion with a social service professional, I was told that private industry is not an appropriate place for many people with disabilities to work because there is no “middle man” or service provider there to train the employee. This seems to be a dominant theme built into vocational services — that the job coach is necessary to find, screen, and support people who may require accommodation.

In addition, using outsiders such as job coaches often furthers the social isolation and stigma experienced by employees who have disabilities. I am familiar with other businesses that separate people with disabilities into special work groups, so they can “benefit” from the expertise of the job coach. To me, this is an ethical violation because it sets people apart and does not contribute to their integration either at work or in society. It is often accompanied by payment of subminimum wages. The law makes this provision with the intent to provide opportunities that might not otherwise be available. However, the resulting segregation, either by pay or physical location, creates a group of second-class citizens.

Complexity of Multiple Agencies and Regulations

The myriad agencies and the complexity of regulations creates a system that both turns off business and creates dependencies on itself. I do not profess to understand the complex array of organizations, rules, and funding streams that make up vocational rehabilitation and employment services. I do see the functional result of the separation of this social service system from business. Despite the social service goals of integrating people into

society, these same people are proclaimed to be "different," needing the special support and expertise that comes from within the system. Schools, too, talk about integrating children with disabilities, while apparently segregating these same children in the classroom and in vocational education. It is very difficult to view this system from the outside and see how it might mesh with business needs and interests.

The Social Service System is Slow to Respond to Business Needs

One would expect that, if the service system for people with disabilities shares with employers expectations for an outcome such as "successful employment," attention would be paid at many levels to the demands placed on the employer. Yet, a system that will go to the extraordinary length of providing a paid public employee to work within a factory as a job coach seems to do little to understand the needs of employers—to be free of specialized language and jargon, to be responsive to business time frames, and to be free of further government intrusion.

Jargon adds to dependencies because it breaks down communication between employers and those providing services. I was a business representative on a local planning council for supported employment. For much of the two years I was involved, the group spoke largely in acronyms—DD, VR, RFP, MR, SSI, CMI, and so on. Employers may spend more time translating than listening!

Business needs are directly tied to the economy. When there is a job opening, it is usually tied to a time frame. If business slows, the job opening is closed. Business expects a reasonably rapid response to its needs. For an example of this problem, we again turn to Bill. The federal government had mandated that the institution in which he lived return 300 people to the community over a two-year period. Even though the 300 individuals had already been identified, we were not allowed to hire from this list because the planning process for this group would not allow a person to come to our county at that time. Our solution was to hire someone who had not been identified as ready to live in the community. In our company, we stress the importance of being on time to work

every day. While Bill was living at the institution, he was dropped off late more than once, and on several occasions had to wait over an hour for a ride home. Since moving into the community, Bill has not been late to work once!

Completing the paperwork and auditing processes that may accompany employment services should not be a role expected of business. It is not expected when employers hire people with lesser disabilities, yet programs for people with more severe disabilities pass these unrealistic expectations on to the employer. At one point, my company was expected to be available for a federal agency audit related to an employee's previous history within a federally supported institution, even though we were receiving no special program funds. The intent of the law was undoubtedly good—ensuring safety and appropriateness of services—but a privately held company that has proprietary information and limits access to its plant would not welcome such an intrusion.

CHANGING ROLES AND ATTITUDES

I have been involved with the direct recruitment, hiring, and coordination of support for employees with developmental and other disabilities. My company has received assistance on occasion when requested, but has elected not to use the ongoing assistance of provider organizations. We do this because of a desire to manage our own employees and have all employees function as a true part of our team. My suggestions for people who provide programs and services are as follows.

Do what you can to promote or facilitate employers' carrying the responsibility for their employees. Our philosophy is that we must hire and train our employees—all of them! We have expert knowledge about our industry, our jobs, and our culture. This knowledge cannot be transferred effectively to another person, such as a job coach, in a short time. As a result, training and supervision are best accomplished through our structure. It is natural for us to want a direct relationship with our employees and to treat all of our employees alike.

Equal treatment demands mutual respect.

I have noticed in meetings, visits to classrooms, and discussions with case managers that, with rare exception, caregivers talk about people in their presence as if they were not there. When caregivers accompany people on tours of our company or job interviews, this behavior has made all of us extremely uncomfortable. Many companies emphasize teamwork and mutual trust and respect within their work environments. Professionals need to scrutinize their actions around employers to ensure that respect for the dignity of a prospective employee is transmitted to the employer.

Address the lack of pay incentives. There is a law in Oregon, and apparently many other states, that says an individual may have to "pay back" the government for care or assistance he or she receives, or has received in the past. I understand there are additional disincentives in the Social Security system. These combine to give an employee little incentive to work overtime or to earn merit pay increases. The motivation of many company managers to hire people with disabilities includes the desire to help people get off public assistance and make them contributing members of society. What incentive is it for an individual with disabilities to do a good job or work overtime when she knows she will not receive the benefit? The employees of my company watched Bill work full time the first two years in a job that paid over \$6 per hour, yet because agencies took money for what they said were services he received, he never acquired more money to spend than when he lived at the institution. This type of problem is beyond the control of the employer and may well represent the type of issue that service providers should address for employers and supported employees.

Avoid testing and predicting performance. Too many people have told me that they need an exact diagnosis of an individual's disability so they can dissect the problem and "predict" how that person will do in a job. There are no certain predictors of future job performance. Employers do have expertise in hiring and matching a person with a job.

Above all, perhaps, we need to challenge all of our "tried and true" procedures to see if they are both effective and respectful of human rights. If the programs and systems with which

I have had personal experience did not actually create disability, then they clearly have not promoted independence. If they have not promoted independence, as is the frequently stated goal, then the strategies they use warrant challenge. Here is one example: My company was exposed to a planning process designed to help an employee with disabilities integrate living, transportation, and work. From my perspective, the intent was positive but the outcome a failure. The meeting was held at work and the employee's supervisor was included. It does not seem to me that one can give an honest, unself-conscious response to a question about how one likes one's job when one's supervisor and others are sitting right there! And we were not comfortable discussing the employee's living situation because we do not do so for other employees. Our discomfort was increased when the employee became emotional at one point because he felt that his feelings about the choice of a living situation were not being considered. It is embarrassing to lose your composure in front of anyone, especially those for whom you work.

SUMMARY

The comments I have made may offend some of the dedicated and thoughtful people who work within the social service system; this was not my intent. The purpose of this article is to provide a perspective that is not drawn from expertise and training within social services, but from the vantage point of an employer who has brushed against that system and sees need for change. The problems of stereotyping and placing too much emphasis on disabilities are not simply confined to the general public but are engaged in by professionals as well. The complexity of the system creates barriers to employment by creating dependencies, responding slowly to business needs, having unrealistic expectations of business, and frequently violating individual rights in the name of protecting those rights. As business attempts to adjust to challenges presented by rapid demographic, economic, and technological changes, social employment-related services must examine their procedures for changes that may be required to be effective in the workplaces of the nineties.