The Evolution of Support in the Workplace

Dennis Sandow, BS
Deborah Olson, PhD
Xiaoyan Yan, PhD
Specialized Training Program
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon

This article provides a quality-improvement framework for discussing the support of employees with disabilities in the workplace. Our intent is to ground the concept in the employment setting and shift the responsibility for supported employment practices from the traditional system to employers and coworkers. The discussion addresses opportunities to improve social and economic outcomes for people with developmental disabilities through supported employment. We apply the principles of quality improvement from business literature as a method for analyzing supported employment from a systems-change perspective. Based on this analysis, natural support emerges as a logical and conceptually sound approach to employment of people with disabilities. We also discuss several principles that have guided initial efforts at implementing support for employers who hire workers with disabilities.

LESSONS FROM NEW COACHES

As part of a grant activity, researchers from the University of Oregon were interested in establishing supported employment in a manufacturing company in Portland, Oregon. A production manager, Don, was resistant to the "sales" tactic typically used in supported employment, and instead invited Ben, a research assistant, to come to work in his department. When Ben started work, he introduced himself as a research assistant interested in supported employment. As an indication of this company's culture, Don's blue collar staff referred to Ben as "fresh meat." When Ben tried to focus his attention on production tasks and complete job and task analysis worksheets, Don's staff would pull him away from the job to include him in company meetings. To enable Ben to experience the full range of company procedures, including its progressive discipline procedures, Don had him written up for repeatedly being late to work.

The company had already made some decisions: to offer a job to a resident of Oregon's mental retardation institution, to pay the new employee full wages and benefits, to modify existing personnel procedures to support the new employee, and to avoid using job coaches and the typical funding system. When Ben suggested the possibility of using a piece-rate certificate, Don was incredulous that someone would propose changing the company's payroll system for one person.

After several visits to the company and successfully interviewing for the job, Alan, a resident of the institution for 20 years, was hired. Ben assumed that he would do the intial training. Instead, Don's employees insisted that they would, arguing, "we've operated this machinery for 10 years; you've spent a couple of hours on it."

After about a month of successfully working on the job, it was time for Alan to move from the institution to Portland. Before arrangements were made for a residential program, Don took Ben aside and said, "A few friends and I have a couple of pickup trucks. We'll go to the institution, pack Alan up, and move him to Portland." "No, you can't do that," replied Ben, "it'll be taken care of." A few weeks later, institution staff packed Alan's belongings in a garbage bag and left them on the lawn of Alan's new group home. Ben realized that

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an opportunity for Alan to bond with coworkers and individuals in the community had been sacrificed in order to follow the procedures required by the disability system.

Sometime later, Ben and Don were discussing a memo to the company's top management describing the nature of Alan's employment. While Don was wondering how to summarize Alan's employment, Ben suggested that it was called *supported employment*. Don set aside his thesaurus. "No, its *corroborated employment*. That's supported employment when you change it a little bit."

THE SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

Scholtes (1988) decines a process as "a series of related tasks directed at accomplishing one particular outcome." In supported employment, these tasks might include staff training, marketing, job development, job analysis, and job coaching. Scholtes also defines a system as "a group of related processes." The system of supported employment has largely remained unchanged, although revised processes, such as those used to facilitate natural support, are beginning to change the nature of support in the workplace. This natural evolution of practices began as a reform of segregated program models that excluded people with the most severe disabilities and gradually moved toward integrated jobs in the community. In the example above, Don's "corroborated employment" represents a new system of supported employment, one in which all of the processes are the responsibility of the company.

The purpose of this article is to provide a framework for discussing support of employees with disabilities that grounds the concept in the employment setting and shifts the responsibility for supported employment practices from the traditional system of paid caregivers to employers and coworkers. The discussion first addresses opportunities to improve social and economic outcomes for people with developmental disabilities through supported employment. Next, we apply the principles of quality improvement from business literature as a method for analyzing supported employment from a system-change perspective. Based on this analysis, we discuss why natural support emerges as a logical and conceptually sound approach to employment of people with disabilities. Finally, we present several principles that have guided our efforts at implementing natural supports.

Concern with Supported Employment Outcomes

Since 1984, various approaches to employment have demonstrated the feasibility of paid, integrated employment for people with developmental disabilities. In a short amount of time, the number of adults with developmental disabilities employed in supported settings has increased dramatically (Buckley and Bellamy, 1986; Shafer et al., 1990). The success of supported employment is evident in the fact that the basic feasibility of employment for adults with a wide range of support needs in a wide range of settings is no longer the focus of policy debate. Supported employment opportunities have also been extended to individuals with mental illness, traumatic brain injuries, and other disabilities. We have reached a point, however, of addressing some of the issues that still trouble us about supported employment: the population served, wages, and the nature of support.

The first issue of concern involves the population served. As originally conceived, supported employment was aimed at people with severe disabilities who were typically excluded from vocational rehabilitation programs (Bellamy et al., 1986, 1988; Wehman and Kregel, 1985). Although national statistics are not available, studies show that this population represents a very small portion of those served; most individuals served could be regarded as having mild disabilities. Yet, in 1989, people with severe or profound disabilities comprised <8% of the 1,500 individuals served by 80 agencies in eight states (Shafer et al., 1990).

Equally troubling are the wage statistics reported for those who work in supported employment. A national survey of 6,814 employees shows that the average monthly wage is $235 (Wehman, Kregel, and Shafer, 1989). It is important to note that these wages are an improvement over shel-

tered workshop earnings, but it is no longer sufficient to stop there in our analysis. Our framework has shifted from the sheltered workshop to a comparison with "the real world." The only conclusion that can be drawn now from these data is that we are placing people in supported employment positions where they will still earn wages well below the poverty level and remain impoverished within the system of disability services. Supproted employment, which began as a reform of workshop conditions, does not substantially affect the financial status of people with disabilities.

A third issue is that physical integration does not necessarily translate to adequate social integration. Again, it is perhaps because our framework has changed from that of finding a job in the community to the quality of the work environment and the satisfaction of the individual involved. Several studies, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, suggest that individuals with disabilities may still be socially isolated within integrated settings. The job coach model of supported employment may well be a barrier to relationships forming in the worksite (Hagner, 1989; Storey et al., 1991; Yan et al., 1990; Olson and Ferguson, 1991). In contrast, a recent study, which followed an individual worker with severe disabilities from an enclave setting to one in which support was provided by coworkers, revealed that social contacts and acceptance were increasing dramatically (Yan et al., 1991). Clearly, we have much to learn about the nature of support and the nature of worksite cultures before we can resolve some of these issues.

Improving the current practices of supported employment — by developing better training techniques, for example — will not be sufficient to solve the issues described above. The concept of natural support has the potential to address these issues, but only if it is developed as a new system and a new way of regarding employment for people with disabilities.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT: AN ANALYSIS

To provide a fresh analysis of supported employment issues, we look to theories of quality improvement from the business literature concerning sources of quality problems. Deming (1975), Juran (1988), and Scholtes (1988) have all addressed variation in product or service outcomes as an important indicator of quality. In production environments, it is important that product features and performance vary as little as possible. Customers want assurances that the product they purchase will be identical to the one advertised. Variation in the service industry is also undesirable; lack of variation is a major marketing feature of fast-food restaurants. The customer satisfaction issue is the same: purchasers of service want the consistent service they have been led to expect.

Juran (1988) described two kinds of causes of variation. A sporadic problem is defined as a "sudden adverse change in the status quo requiring remedy through restoring the status quo." A chronic problem is "a long-standing adverse situation requiring remedy through changing the status quo." Scholtes (1988) asserted that the system is usually the root cause of variation in quality outcomes, and that $\geq 85\%$ of quality problems can only be corrected by system changes.

Juran's classifications provide a framework for examining quality problems in supported employment. The low representation of the severe disability population, low wages, and limited social integration appear to be chronic quality problems showing little variation across the nation. From Juran's perspective, this is a "long-standing adverse situation," not a "sudden adverse change." Rather than attributing these problems to job coach performance, however, we should follow Scholtes' advice and examine the "system," which has defined the desired features of supported employment service.

COMPARING SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES WITH TYPICAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The current system of supported employment emerged from our knowledge of special education and rehabilitation services. When supported employment was first conceptualized, there was little

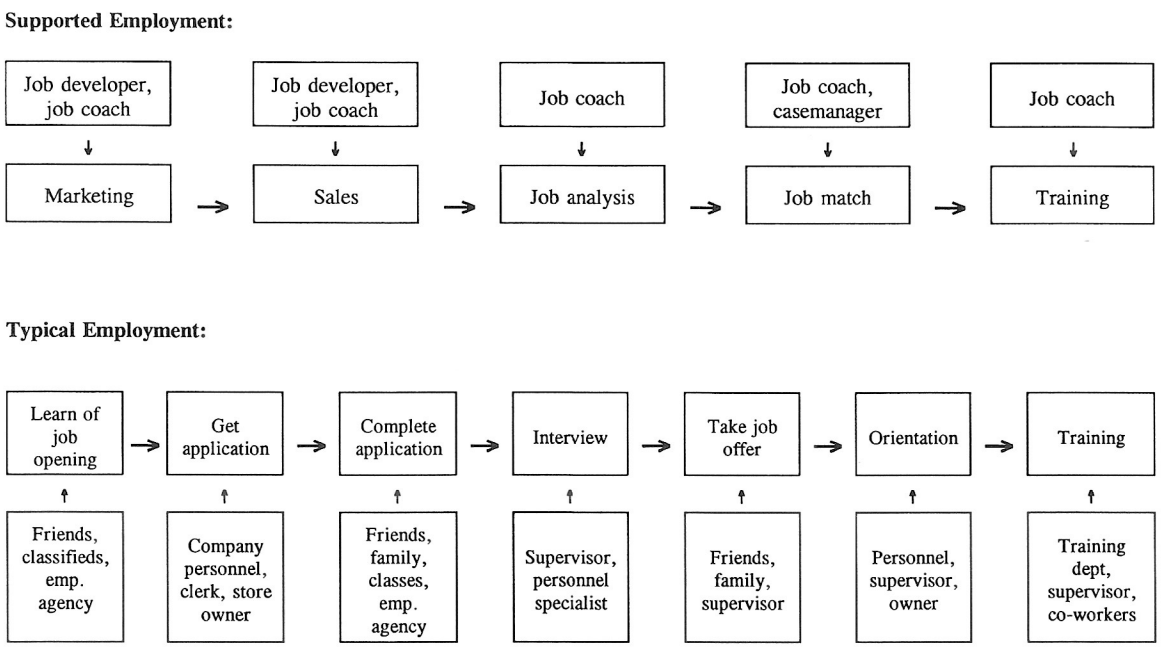

Figure 1. Supported Employment Process Versus Typical Employment Process.

experience with business and the natural work environment. Supported employment practices, therefore, became a miniature service system inserted into the world of business. The supported employment professional became the focal point for marketing, job analysis, job match, training, and ongoing support. The new practices did not capitalize on the typical employment processes of the community.

The job hunt exemplifies this point. In the typical process of job hunting, an individual learns of a job opening, gets an application, completes it, and interviews for the job. If an offer is made and the individual decides to take the job, he or she then participates in whatever orientation is typically provided. Underlying this process is support from a community of social agents. For example, one may learn of the job opening through friends, employment agencies, employers, parents, or relatives. The job seeker has many opportunities to establish social contacts and obtain information about the community and potential employers. The process also offers employers and coworkers opportunities to obtain information about potential employees. Supported employment practices typically replace this process with activities conducted by a job coach or placement specialist. Some activities (marketing, sales, job analysis, job match, and hiring) might be conducted before the employer or coworkers ever meet the individual with developmental disabilities. Job training and support also become the function of the support agency rather than a feature of the work environment.

All of these efforts systematically isolate the new employee with developmental disabilities from important social interactions. They also limit the amount of choice available to both the person with a disability and the employer. In addition, traditional practices also place the responsibility entirely on public rather than community resources. These two approaches are compared in Figure 1. By this analysis, it is clear that many problems with traditional supported employment practices can be attributed to the system itself. A new conceptualization of supporting employees with disabilities is needed.

FRAMING SUPPORT IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Ironically, the term *natural support* has its roots in supported employment literature (Nisbet and Hagner, 1987) and has little or no meaning in business literature. Support already exists in most workplaces, as is evidenced by business assistance programs that support employees with diverse needs. There are powerful factors influencing these trends, such as a growing national debt (Curry, 1990; DeFazio, 1992; Marotta, 1992; Starr, 1988), the decline of the hierarchical model of organization in favor of a more flat, matrix-type organization emphasizing team decision making (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990; Kennedy and Hatfield, 1991; Kilmann, 1990; Orsburn et al., 1990; Probst and Gomez, 1989; Scholtes, 1988; Tomasek, 1990; Zeleny, 1988), and the diversity of a work force that is less educated and more in need of training and other support (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990; U.S. Congress, 1990; Jacon, 1991; Johnston and Packer, 1987; Kennedy and Hatfield, 1991; Kolberg and Smith, 1992; Noble, 1992; Ong, 1988; Swaboda, 1990; Thurow, 1992).

These labor trends, and the national responses to them (see Ramsing et al., this issue) hold great potential for employees with disabilities. If we conceptualize "support" from the business perspective, we can see that it is more than just job training. Support can be defined as any activity resulting in an increase in an employee's knowledge and participation in the work force. This can take the form of job training as it relates to specific tasks. However, the employment environment may have other activities and resources committed to supporting employees. These activities and resources are available to employees from the very beginning of the job-finding process (assistance with applications, interviews, orientation, etc.) and continue after hiring through on-the-job training and employee social interactions that inform the new employee of expected task performance and role in the workplace (Laliberte and Schneider, 1991). The task of the support agency or job development specialist, then, becomes one of identifying where these resources exist and supporting the employer in applying them to potential employees with disabilities. This shift in focus requires more than just a new set of skills for the job development specialist. It requires a new way of thinking about the complexity of the relationships between the individual with disabilities, the employer and coworkers, and the support agency. This shift is best described by revisiting the job-hunting process from the new perspective of natural support. Reframing these practices has evolved from our experiences with employers, support agencies, and employees with disabilities. It is not meant as a description of a new model with locked-in practices.

Relationships with Business

All employers cannot be approached in the same way. In a traditional approach to supported employment, the initial contact with an employer is regarded as a sales and marketing activity with the desired outcome being a commitment from the employer to become involved in supported employment. The service provider must "convince" the employer. The "sales pitch" often includes promises to provide all the support required by the person with disabilities, a description of the superior performance characteristics of the employee with disabilities (better attendance, willingness to do repetitious work, etc), and economic incentives such as paying the supported employee subminimum wage or piece rates, receiving tax credits, etc.

Businesses typically do not recruit, interview, and hire employees as a result of marketing approaches. An alternative method of developing initial relationships with employers might include identifying the employer's interest in employing people with disabilities and defining the service provider's role as support/assistance/resource. If the employer indicates an interest, the service provider might ask the employer to suggest the next steps and offer herself or himself as a resource. Acting as a resource, the provider might then conduct an analysis within the company. These early contacts are particularly important because they locate the decision-making activities with the em-

ployer rather than the provider agency, thus setting the tone for all remaining activities.

Analyzing Business Environments

In the traditional approach to supported employment, the job analysis phase identifies tasks, work requirements, and integration opportunities for the employee with disabilities by having service providers work in the company, usually for a day or two. At the same time, other employees learn important features of supported employment: (1) the role of the job coach is to provide all training and supervision for the first few weeks, including contact with the individual's home or other involved agencies, and (2) the characteristics and features of the person with a disability. As a result of job analysis, the job, pay rate, and benefits for the employee with disabilities are defined. Most important, the roles of the job coach and the other employees are clearly defined.

Shifting the focus of support from individuals with disabilities to employers is best accomplished as a joint effort of the support agency, employer, and coworkers. Unlike traditional supported employment practices, the role of the service provider is now defined by the employer. A human service professional conducts an analysis in the company, but the purpose of the analysis is to answer the question, "what does this company need in order to hire an employee with disabilities?"

By working in the company for an extended time, the analyst learns about the support that already exists at the worksite. Careful attention is paid to employees who train the service provider, formal and informal orientations provided to all employees, training departments, if they exist, support available for employees who require assistance in one form or another, and social interactions among employees. The analyst learns the unique culture of that particular workplace. This requires that the attention of the analyst shift from a "micro" focus on tasks to a "company" focus on the policies, procedures, social mores, and formal and informal social networks that support employees.

While working in the company, the service provider will have many interactions with other employees and should be able to identify a very important resource: a voluntary social network interested in employing people with disabilities. These employees typically ask questions about why the service provider is there, mention their interest or experience with people with disabilities, ask about the type of person who will be placed, and even suggest areas where the employee with disabilities might work. By listening carefully, it is clear that the company employees are defining the approach to supporting employees with disabilities. This approach, based on common sense and company culture, often requires only back-up assistance from the service provider. It has been our experience that the employees' approaches to support are better designed and often make more sense than the approaches suggested by the service provider, who is an outsider.

Hiring Employees with Disabilities

In traditional supported employment practices, the service provider selects the individual to be placed in the company, accompanies the individual to work, and provides training on identified job tasks. As the employee with disabilities demonstrates independence on the task, the service provider fades out or gradually withdraws support.

This process looks very different when the employer provides the support framework. A critical task is identifying how modifications of the employers' existing employment procedures (recruiting, interviewing, hiring, training, and supervision) can enhance the employment of people with disabilities. Following company hiring procedures, the employer would:

1. Recruit a pool of applicants with disabilities
2. Have people with disabilities complete applications
3. Interview these applicants
4. Offer a job with normal pay and benefits to an applicant
5. Provide orientation to the new employee
6. Train the new employee using training departments or other employees.

Because we conceptualize support as activities that provide employees with the information necessary for them to perform their jobs, it is clear that the typical hiring procedures are supportive. Instead of supporting an employee through these procedures, we can help the employer change procedures to include applicants with disabilities. For instance, supported employment professionals might help a company to recruit applicants that include people with disabilities or teach supervisors new communication skills that enable them to interview someone who does not speak. This company assistance strategy may also include teaching coworkers systematic training techniques.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that the existing systems for supporting all employees should be the systems that support employees with disabilities. They may need to be assessed and enhanced with the help of an outside support agency, but businesses and employers are ready and able to support employees with a wide range of challenging needs. As we reconceptualize support for employees with disabilities in the workplace, it is not necessary to frame this support from our human service perspectives, which limit the potential for employers and employees with disabilities to find each other. People with disabilities have proven themselves to be very dynamic in making the change from sheltered workers to employees of companies. Similarly, U.S. businesses must become even more dynamic than they are today if they are to regain competitive position.

Training the American work force has become a top priority of business. Motorola spends approximately $1,350 per new employee in teaching basic skills. When the new employee cannot read, the company will spend up to $25,000 per employee (Smith, 1989). As business refines its system of training and "support" for all employees, it makes sense that those concerned with supported employment do the same. We need more experience building on existing supports and applying new approaches in different setting with various types of workers. The resulting system of supported employment will be a dramatic shift away from directly serving people with disabilities to supporting companies as they employ people with disabilities. The new approaches should be evaluated in terms of effectiveness for individuals with a variety of disabilities, eliminating existing socioeconomic discrepancies, and instilling a sense of mutual ownership both in employees with disabilities and their employers.

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