

EMPLOYMENT & TRANSITIONING

HOW CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT CAN IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

BY TERRY ARCHER

BACKGROUND

The shift from Sheltered Employment to obtaining Community Employment for all is a lofty goal and one that we all hope is obtainable. Let us look at some facts of both community and sheltered employment.

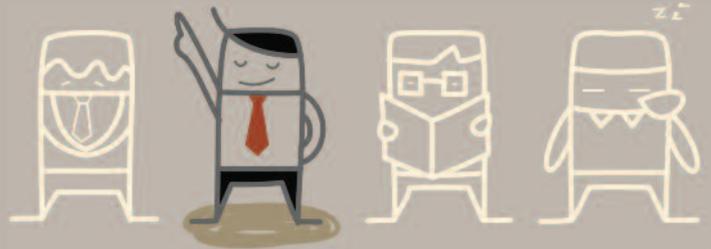
In the 1960s, parents of individuals with disabilities wanted activities for their children who were graduating high school. Staying at home was not an option. Those parents worked together to start day programs for their adult children. They offered two types of settings: one was focused on arts and crafts, while the other dealt primarily with employment activities.

In the 1970s, the programs that offered arts were struggling financially and sought financial support from the states. With government involvement, mandates that programs offer training to support individuals in work related activities soon followed. Thus, the focus to Sheltered Employment programs offering a wide variety of training activities.

In the last few years, the shift is moving from a Sheltered Environment to employment for everyone in the communities in which they live. Obtaining community employment is a goal that we all hope is achievable. The community employment options can best be assessed by understanding the communities in which we live, the employment options within the communities and the choices for individual and their families.

DIFFERENT OPTIONS FOR DIVERSE NEEDS

Community employment offers an individual who desires employment to seek that choice within the communities where they live. Those individuals have integration and broader choices in employment than those offered in a sheltered environment. Along with customized employment for the individual needs, these individuals work for an employer and earn minimum wage or higher, with the goal of tenure because of support from co-workers and managers. Again, we must look at the employment situation in the



communities that we live and at the individualized needs of the individuals we serve. Community employment is an option for those who choose this path of employment and who want to work in the communities in which they live. Community employment that requires one-on-one support is limited by available funding

and typically supports 20 to 30 work hours per month.

Sheltered Employment offers specialized training and employment options for those individuals who, due to the disability or choice, prefer a secure setting. Sheltered Employment staff are highly trained to meet government and regulatory requirements. Sheltered Employment offers structure along with training in many related areas including social skills, communication, and a variety of work related skills such as staying on task, quality, and increase of production. Sheltered Employment can also provide personal care, oversight of medications, and behavior support, and includes a willingness to work with individuals who may have barriers preventing the community work environment. Staff has an understanding of individualized needs in order to support success. Sheltered employment may offer a longer program or workday, four to six hours a day, five days a week. Sheltered Employment offers families and providers respite knowing that the individual is in a protected environment with staff trained to support each employee's individual needs.

Sheltered Employment pays the individuals based either on a piece rate or on hourly rate depending on their own productivity. Often times their wages are below the state's minimum wage rates. The agencies have to apply for and receive a 14(c) certification that allows them to pay this sub-minimum wage. Sheltered employment historically has been to support individuals that require the higher level of services; however, it can also be a choice for those individuals who for their own personal reasons do not want to participate in a mainstream work environment.

CHOICES ARE NEEDED

According to *Disability Scoop*:

"The jobless rate for those with disabilities fell to 14.1 percent in August, the Labor Department said Friday. That's down from 14.7 percent the prior month. The drop in unemployment, however, may be at least partly due to

fewer people with disabilities looking for work, the data indicates. At the same time, unemployment for the general population dipped to 7.3 percent as the economy added 169,000 jobs, the Labor Department said. ("Unemployment Declines For Those With Disabilities," September 6, 2013).

"The harsh reality is that nearly eight in 10 working-age Americans with disabilities are unemployed," said Carol Glazer, president of the National Organization on Disability ("New Federal Rule Aims To Boost Disability Employment," August 28, 2013)



If we continue to see the shift to Community Employment as the only option for individuals transitioning from high school to employment we will continue to see unemployment rates rise. Individuals will not find Community Employment due to the inability to obtain and sustain employment in their communities.

THE SHELTERED EMPLOYMENT OPTION

If an individual works in sheltered employment, they are not considered competitively employed, earning minimum wage.

The 14(c) certification is given to sheltered employment agencies who meet rigid Federal guidelines. These guidelines include a completed break down of the given job task along with start and end times. Per the Federal requirements, a standard must be set by using typically non-disabled individuals who are trained in the specific job and timed on how long it takes them to complete the job. Wage surveys must be completed annually to identify the wage that a trained individual would earn working in that similar field. Once the wage and the standard are identified, the individual with a disability is timed doing the same job in the same method used to set the standard. Their wage is then based on the production percent.



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By way of example, ABC company employee assembles widgets and is paid \$10/hour, the prevailing wage for that job. A skilled worker can complete 10 widgets in one hour so he is paid \$1.00 for each widget completed. When a sheltered employed client works and produces a widget, he will be paid \$1.00/widget, whether he can complete a widget in 10 minutes or if it takes him an hour to complete the widget. His pay is based upon the set standard of \$1.00 per widget. Anytime an individual has a new position lasting longer than a month, a new timing will occur. If an hourly wage is needed, the same methods will be used setting the wage.

Currently the Federal Government is reviewing the 14(c) certifications and would like to see this option faded out and all individuals earn minimum wage or above. If this happens, all Sheltered Employment options would cease to exist, which means any individual who wishes to choose this type of service will be turned away. Many Sheltered Employment agencies have already closed their doors.

THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSITIONING STUDENTS WITH PROFOUND NEEDS FROM HIGH SCHOOL

Currently in the State of Washington, graduating students with disabilities are placed on a waiver immediately when community employment is obtained if they qualify for funding. If, however, the individual or parents would prefer Sheltered Employment as an option, they are put on a waiting list with a random yearly draw. This typically means those individual with the most significant disabilities, such as those with troubling behaviors and profound personal and support care needs are left to sit at home, and often will lose many of the skills that they had obtained while in a school setting.

Idleness and limited work opportunities is not only isolating, but can prove dangerous.

Studies have shown that people with disabilities are at least three times more likely to experience abuse than people without disabilities. Risk reduction requires knowing who the likely perpetrators might be. A

person with a disability is more likely to be abused by a family member or someone in their daily routine than they are by a complete stranger. (From *Abuse of People with Disabilities* by Nora J. Baladerian Ph.D, Thomas F Coleman, and Jim Stream).

An individual with a significant disability who needs one-on-one support with community employment may never develop a trusting relationship with employment staff if they are only seen once or twice a weekly lasting an hour or two. Normally, such limited work hours do not allow enough time for an employee-employer bond, so that when abuse occurs, it is not voiced by the abused individual—or, in the case where abuse leads to a change in behavior, it will not be recognized by assigned staff as abuse because they don't know the individual. The staff person may attribute a change due to the inconsistency of the individual's daily activity.

"Factors that appear to increase the vulnerability of this population include deficiencies of sexual knowledge, physical and emotional dependence on caregivers, multiple caregiving, limited communication skills and behavioral difficulties." (National Disability Authority of Ireland).

"Children with any type of disability are 3.44 times more likely to be a victim of some type of abuse compared to children without disabilities." (The Arc of the United States).

Isolation and abuse are real risks when employment options are limited, especially for individuals with profound developmental disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Whether an individual and their family choose Community Employment or Sheltered Employment, it should be their choice recognizing that choices will change over time and as individual needs change. There are sound arguments for both employment options. The bottom line is individual choice. If the option for Sheltered Employment is removed then individuals with the highest level of need - those that require one-on-one support - will have very limited options for any employment related activities.●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Terry Archer is currently the Supported Employment Manager at Yakima Specialties in Yakima Washington. She has worked in the field supporting individuals with all types of disabilities advocating for their choices whether or not it is a choice that she may agree to. Terry is a strong individual advocate believing in educating individuals and their families to ensure all options are reviewed, to ensure the best services are identified to meet the individual wants and needs. Terry started her career volunteering in a school district in Oregon later moving to California having oversight of a Pre-vocational and Group Supported program, then moving to Washington State working in Pre-vocational, Group Supported and Individual Community Supported Employment related activities as the Director of Employment.

Yakima Specialties Inc. was formed by a group of parents developing a business model to offer employment related activities to their adult children who had disabilities, and wanted their adult children to be productive members of society. Yakima Specialties Inc. produces quality wood products; provides a medical laundry facility, commercial janitorial, and community placement activities, please feel free to visit our website at www.yakimaspecialties.com



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YOU do?

The Campaign for
Disability Employment

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