

Assessing Work Culture

How support is provided both formally and informally varies among businesses depending on type of company, personalities, economic and cultural climate, etc. For a job coach to help a worker with disabilities develop supports and social connections in the workplace, he or she must get to know how people interact, how people connect with each other for work and social purposes, and what does and does not “fit in”. Here are some basic guidelines for job coaches in assessing work culture:

- **Read the informal culture:** What rules are followed and what aren't? How social are people at work? Who are the “real leaders” or people looked at with authority? How much “deviation from the norm” is tolerated or even embraced? Do people socialize outside the workplace?
- **Identify patterns over time:** Make observations of the work culture over time and look for common themes. What's really valued and important within this work culture? Who really “fits in”? Why?
- **Look at food and drink customs:** What are the customs and rules around meal periods? How about break periods? Do people drink coffee and bring in food?
- **Look for gathering places:** Where do people “hang out” during work? How about after work?
- **Look for shared equipment:** Do people share “tools”? This can include items typically thought of as tools, as well as such items as copy machines, computers, fax machines, etc.
- **Identify social customs:** Are there birthday parties and other celebrations? Do people contribute towards gifts? Does the workplace have holiday parties and summer picnics?

As the job coach assesses the workplace culture, they need to be helping the worker with a disability to participate in that culture. This includes such things as helping them invite a co-worker to lunch or joining the daily lunch crowd, bringing in food for break, going out after work with co-workers, etc. Help the worker with a disability to learn greetings, co-workers' names, and topics and proper interactions for small talk. Help the person with a disability know when to offer assistance to a co-worker. The job coach's role is to facilitate the worker's participation in these rituals, but not to participate in these rituals with the worker. The more the worker with a disability can initiate his/her participation in these rituals on his/her own (with possible “behind-the-scenes” encouragement from the job coach), the better.

Guidelines for Developing Natural Supports and Social Inclusion

Using a natural supports approach does not mean there is no need for job coaches, or that staff will not spend time training and supporting workers on the job. It does mean that staff will now have the additional responsibilities to identify and facilitate natural supports, assist in developing social connections, and serve as a resource and support to supervisors and co-workers.

Below is a checklist of areas that employers and co-workers can be involved in with the worker

with disabilities. It does not need to be an either/or situation (i.e., either the employer is totally responsible or the job coach is totally responsible). For each area, you need to consider the employer's knowledge, experience, and resources; and consider the preferences of the worker with disabilities in determining the roles that you, the employer, and others (co-workers, family and friends) will play in supporting him/her.

- **Introductions and Orientation:** Unless there is great discomfort on the part of the employer or worker, this can, and should, be done by the employer.
- **Training and Support:** This will often be a shared function with the need to negotiate with the employer how you both can work together to provide training and support in a way that promotes the value and the social inclusion of the worker.
- **Work Assignments:** Assigning and evaluating work should be done by the employer from the start. If the job coach assumes responsibility for this, investment in the employee, appreciation for progress made, and eventual transfer of these functions by the employer may be problematic.
- **Performance Evaluation:** The worker with a disability should be subject to the same formal and informal performance evaluation procedures as other employees. The job coach should become aware of what these procedures are, and possibly provide a supportive role in their implementation if requested by the employer. The job coach should never do the evaluation for the employer, and with the possible exception of enclave situations, should not provide feedback to be used in the evaluation.
- **Inclusion in Company Activities:** Job coaches are outsiders and may not be aware of the extent of formal (and especially informal) social and other activities.
- **Transportation:** Besides formal transportation like reduced public transportation fares or shuttle services, there may be a "culture" of workers carpooling or sharing rides.
- **Job Modification and Problem Solving:** Supervisors and co-workers who are familiar with the work can often be one of the best resources for job accommodations. Involving the employer (and co-workers) early on in this can help them feel competent to deal with the worker with disabilities and prevent them from building unnecessary dependence on the job coach.
- **Communication with Agency:** The format this takes needs to be mutually agreed upon with the employer, co-workers, and the worker with disabilities with the ultimate responsibility for assuring that communication happens with the job coach.

Examples of Natural Supports

Below are some examples of natural support strategies that have been developed to support workers with disabilities. These strategies are based on the type of supports that workers with and without disabilities receive on and off their jobs.

- Worker gets to work by car pooling with co-workers
- Co-worker orients and trains worker
- Co-worker cues break and lunch times
- Supervisor sets up work area
- Co-worker assists with paperwork
- Cashier provides assistance with making change
- Security guard assists with using the time clock
- Supervisor and co-worker reinforce productivity and quality

- Workers do tasks together
- Employee health assists with monitoring medication
- Co-worker offers advice about relationship problems

Co-workers as Trainers

- **If possible, observe the co-worker's training style with other employees**
- **Give the worker some basic training skills and suggestions**
- **Provide opportunities for feedback and support to the co-worker**
- **Show co-workers how to measure progress**
- **Be available to back-up or supplement co-worker training**
- **Reinforce the use of good training techniques**

- **It is important that the co-worker trainer(s) and the worker have compatible personalities and styles**
- **This includes information about the worker's preferred learning style**
- **As employers and co-workers take on more responsibility for training and supporting the worker, the job coach's role becomes more of a consultant and support to the "supporters"**
- **Involving the co-worker as trainer does not preclude the job coach from providing direct training when the demands, comfort level or skills required go beyond what the co-worker can or will do**

In many ways, using a natural supports strategy increases the initial work for the job coach. But if the long-term goal is to develop positive and lasting connections between the worker with a disability and others in the workplace, it will be work worth doing. In addition, the job coach needs to act as a role model and public relations specialist to encourage involvement with the worker with disabilities and provide support and reinforcement for supervisors and co-workers. Some of the expansion of the job coach's role to develop natural supports and social connections will include making the following activities a priority:

- Develop relationship with the employer with clarity about the job coach's role
- Model interactions with the worker for supervisor and co-workers
- Highlight the worker's strengths and interests
- Reinforce positive interactions between the worker and co-workers
- Seek out common interests and experiences between the worker with disabilities and co-workers
- Give practical advice to supervisor and co-workers regarding the worker
- Teach worker conversational skills
- Utilize natural tools (i.e., food, coffee, etc.) for interactions

Promoting natural supports and social inclusion means changing the role the job coach plays with people with disabilities, employers, families and the community from that of being the primary trainer and supporter to consultant and facilitator.