BRINGING EMPLOYMENT FIRST TO SCALE

Essential Elements in Organizational Transformation: Findings From a Delphi Panel of Experts

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Key Findings from the RRTC on Advancing Employment

Introduction

The process of organizational transformation away from sheltered workshops and towards competitive integrated employment* can be a challenging yet rewarding journey. Provider experiences along this path of transformation can vary widely, and methods of planning and implementation may contrast greatly. The process of transformation often requires an organizational paradigm shift that includes the development of a new vision, cultural change, funding restructuring, staff capacity building, and rebranding of communications and messaging, as well as tracking and managing progress. With all of these competing priorities, providers often wonder where and how to begin.

The findings from Institute for Community Inclusion's (ICI's) Delphi Process on Organizational Transformation can guide providers as they work to transform their services. These findings support the prioritization of goals and the development of key action areas that have proven successful.

In this brief, we will:

1. share ten essential elements in organizational transformation ranked in their order of importance according to ICI's Delphi process, and

2. offer a set of considerations to providers as they move their organizational transformation efforts forward.

What is a Delphi process?

A Delphi process is a research technique used to obtain a reliable group opinion using a group of experts. It engages experts who can assist in addressing a complex problem. This process embraces a range of opinions in way that insures that uncertainties related to the problem are accurately represented (Rowe & Wright, 1999).

* Competitive integrated employment is defined within the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act as full-time or part-time work at minimum wage or higher, with wages and benefits similar to those without disabilities performing the same work, and fully integrated with co-workers without disabilities (Hoff, 2014).

Who Were the Delphi Panelists?

The Delphi panelists represented a range of groups, including organization administrators and leadership (50%), and providers of training and technical assistance (41.2%). Other groups were fairly evenly distributed across state IDD agency staff, community providers, direct support professionals, family members, self-advocates or individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and researchers. Thirteen respondents identified as being part of more than one stakeholder group.

The respondents displayed a vast amount of knowledge and experience in the organizational transformation process. Most of the Delphi panelists (68%) had been working in the field for over 20 years, and had high levels of experience in either participating or leading organizational transformation efforts. Twenty-six respondents (76.5%) reported having taken part in an organizational change process, and 20 respondents (58.8%) had served in a leadership role in that kind of process.

How was the Delphi process implemented?

The Delphi process had two rounds of inquiry. First, the 36 experts were asked to respond to six elements essential in organizational transformation, as identified by earlier research conducted by ICI and Virginia Commonwealth University (Butterworth et al., 2007). They were asked to change or refine any of the six characteristics' definitions, as well as to add any new characteristics they felt were missing.

Panelists confirmed the original six elements of organizational change and identified four additional areas that are essential to transformation. In the second round, the Delphi panelists were asked to rank these ten elements in order of importance.

Findings

The final ranked elements from the Delphi panel were as follows:

1. **Clear and consistent goals:** An explicit commitment to increasing competitive integrated employment is essential. Goals must be measurable, compelling, and easy to grasp, directly reflective of the core mission, modifiable, and specific to an established time frame. They must also reflect the needs of individuals.

2. **An agency culture that values inclusion:** Agencies need to establish a culture that values supporting individuals in the community rather than in facilities. The culture also must value positive thinking, learning, creativity, innovation, and continuous quality improvement.

3. **An active, person-centered job placement process:** At the same time that they are focused on changes at the organizational level, agencies must be proactive in moving forward at the individual level, finding jobs for one person at a time. This "just do it" approach creates momentum and enthusiasm as successful employment outcomes are achieved and celebrated.

4. **A strong internal and external communications plan:** Providers must communicate clear, authentic expectations for competitive integrated employment. Internally, this includes all levels of staff, individuals, and their families. Externally, successful organizations market themselves and their services throughout the community.

5. **Reallocated and restructured resources:** Transformation requires an active and ongoing investment in realigning all fiscal, material, and staff resources in order to put into place the supports and services needed for increasing competitive integrated employment.

6. **An ongoing investment in staff professional development:** Essential to the transformation is frequent and ongoing training, continuing education, conference participation, and mentorship opportunities to develop and maintain staff's core competencies and to implement best practices.

7. **A focus on customer engagement:** Providers must engage with their customer groups. First, they can partner with self-advocates, families, funders, and other community partners. Second, they can engage new and existing business partners to meet both individual and market needs.

8. **Effective employment performance measurement, quality assurance, and program oversight:** Establishing a clear framework for implementing and measuring administrative, management, and program strategies over defined periods of time will help agencies determine the impact of their efforts and their success in obtaining desired results.

9. **A holistic approach:** Providers must consider the whole person with wrap-around life supports as necessary, and use a career planning process that involves staff, parents, and friends. This process should take into account any necessary accommodations, including assistive technology.

10. **Multiple and diverse community partnerships:** Engagement of state systems and other organizations can be key to creating buy-in for the change process. Partners may include school districts, state agency offices such as vocational rehabilitation, faith-based and/or civic organizations, and transportation resources.

Considerations

The Delphi panel supported earlier ICI research.

The Delphi panel agreed that the original six characteristics of successful organizational transformation still applied after nearly ten years (Butterworth et al., 2007). Those six characteristics included:

1. Having clear and uncompromising goals
2. Reallocating and restructuring resources
3. Focusing on active job placement one person at a time
4. Developing partnerships
5. Considering the whole person
6. Communicating expectations to everyone, often

The Delphi panel recommended certain modifications to the original definitions.

The Delphi panel made recommendations to update and refine some of the original definitions. For example, the definition of "a holistic approach" was expanded to include multiple stakeholders around the individual, as well as technological accommodations. "Developing partnerships" was adjusted to include a wider diversity of partnerships, such as with schools, transportation entities, and faith-based organizations.

While the original six elements held true, the panelists added four new ones.

The four new elements of successful organizational transformation added by the Delphi panel were:

1. Creating an agency culture that values inclusion
2. Maintaining an ongoing investment in staff professional development

3. Focusing on customer engagement

4. Concentrating on effective employment performance measurement, quality assurance, and program oversight

The panel's four additional elements might reflect new priorities in the field, a focus on sustainability of transformation efforts, and ongoing improvement of previous efforts.

For example, an "agency culture that values inclusion" represents an organizational commitment to helping job seekers find work in the community, which must be shared by all staff and stakeholders. This may be a necessary addition to the development of consistent goals and for sustainability of that mission.

An "ongoing investment in staff professional development" allows the provider to stay competitive through trainings, mentorship, continuing education, and conference participation, allowing the mission and vision to be realized at the front-line.

A "focus on customer engagement" emphasizes the explicit linking of job seekers with employers, recognizing the more recently developing concept of the employer as a dual customer, as well as the need for the mutual satisfaction of both parties.

Finally, the panelists' addition of "effective employment performance measurement, quality assurance, and program oversight" reflects the field's emphasis on collection and use of both outcome data and process data to continually improve.

Conclusion

A growing number of providers are increasingly focused on full community inclusion and achieving improved competitive integrated employment outcomes. Our understanding of the transformation process continues to evolve as agencies close their workshops and support employment and community participation.

The findings and updated recommendations from the Delphi panel reflect the changes that are underway in the field of employment for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and our evolving understanding of what it takes to successfully transform services and to create lasting organizational change.

What's next?

Project staff will conduct case study research with four community providers that have transformed services to prioritize competitive integrated employment. Findings from this case study research will be used to validate and refine the existing ten elements, and to provide an on-the-ground perspective on successful implementation strategies with an emphasis on replication.

These elements will inform a framework and subsequent toolkit to support community providers as they transform their employment services. The toolkit will become the basis for technical assistance provided as part of a scalable, facilitated peer-learning community. Researchers will test the impact of provider involvement in this peer network on organizational change and individual employment outcomes in later years of the project.

References

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Bringing Employment First to Scale Key Findings series

The Bringing Employment First to Scale Key Findings series shares research from ICI's ThinkWork projects, which focus on increasing employment for individuals with IDD. The goal of this series is to identify and share findings that support state agencies, providers, advocates, individuals and families to make the philosophy of Employment First a reality.

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Suggested Citation:
Timmons, J., Lyons, O., (2016) *Essential Elements in Organizational Transformation: Findings From a Delphi Panel of Experts.* Bringing Employment First to Scale, Issue 8. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.