People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are among the most likely Americans to be unemployed, live in poverty, or rely on public programs. In 2013, only 23% of working-age people with cognitive disabilities—a broad demographic category that includes individuals with IDD—were employed, compared to 72% of people without disabilities.

While over 30 states have adopted an Employment First policy (a declaration that employment is the priority outcome for people with disabilities), a key challenge is ensuring that supports meet the standards for best practice. Employment supports are delivered by what we refer to as “employment consultants.” We use this term to describe staff who support individuals with disabilities to find and keep an individual integrated job in the community. Other titles may include employment specialist, job developer, or job coach.

What do we know about employment supports?

The successful employment of job seekers depends in large part on the knowledge, skills, and abilities of employment consultants to develop, match, and support jobs that meet both the job seeker’s and the employer’s interests and needs. The literature defines a number of research-based and promising practices in employment supports, including person-centered career planning and assessment, customized employment, workplace culture analysis, using personal and professional networks, and building and ensuring natural supports.

However, studies suggest these practices may be inconsistently used in the field. One study found employment consultants had only limited experience with investing in discovery or career planning, spending time with individuals in community settings, working with families, and negotiating job responsibilities with an employer. Minimal opportunities for effective professional development, including both formal and informal chances for learning, may contribute to this disconnect. However, employment consultants who receive appropriate training and mentorship to implement these strategies in their work improve the number and quality of the jobs they develop.

This brief:

- Shares what we know about bringing best practice to scale.
- Introduces a line of research that builds a strategy for an effective workforce for employment supports.

PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYMENT CONSULTANTS PERFORMING THESE JOB SEARCH ACTIVITIES FOR MOST OR ALL JOB SEEKERS OR IN THE PAST THREE MONTHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reviewed classified ads</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made cold calls to employers</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approached past employers</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended business events*</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked employers about related businesses</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved family members or acquaintances</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knocked on doors of businesses*</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiated job descriptions</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searched without referrals in mind*</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-Stop Career Centers</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Migliore, Hall, Butterworth, and Winsor (2010)

How do we bring effective practice to scale?

Training is one pathway to improving performance. Training for employment consultants is available from both state and national resources. Two organizations, APSE (the Association for Person Supporting Employment First) and ACRE (the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators), have created...
Out of the office? What activities are most effective for increasing the number and Interacting with businesses? On job development activities? A mixed-method research approach will include a qualitative To strengthen the role of employment consultants by supporting Interacting with job seekers’ personal networks? To what extent do activities implemented by employment What is the impact of an integrated approach to training, data-based connections between job seekers and businesses.

Regardless of the job seeker’s level of motivation, skill, experience, attitude, and support system, his or her ability to get a job will often depend on the effectiveness of employment consultants...” (Luecking et al., 2004)

What’s next
As we complete qualitative analysis of over 40 interviews with employment consultants, supervisors, job seekers, and family members to understand effective employment support practices, we will present findings back to participants to make sure we “got it right.” Findings will be disseminated through a peer-reviewed manuscript, an online brief, and an implementation guide that describes an integrated employment support model and decision guide for employment consultants.

Findings from this study will inform an intervention with 160 employment consultants from 30 community rehabilitation providers across four states. The intervention will consist of a package of online training, data-based performance feedback, facilitated peer-to-peer learning and support, and distance technical assistance activities administered over a period of 12 months.

What’s the goal?
» To strengthen the role of employment consultants by supporting their use of best and promising practices using a combination of online training, regular data-based performance feedback, and peer supports using a virtual community of practice.

How will we get there?
» A mixed-method research approach will include a qualitative study and a randomized controlled trial. The qualitative study is exploring the practices of employment consultants recommended for their effectiveness in supporting job seekers with IDD. Interviews have been conducted with 16 employment consultants, their supervisors, job seekers, and family members. Next, a randomized controlled trial will test the effectiveness of an intervention for improving employment outcomes.

Our research questions:
» To what extent do activities implemented by employment consultants relate to the approaches described in the literature? How do consultants make decisions about which strategies to use? How are these activities tracked?
» What is the impact of an integrated approach to training, data-based performance feedback, and peer support on employment consultant use of best practices? What benchmarks predict better employment outcomes and higher quality employment?
Sources

1. Braddock et al., 2015; Butterworth et al., 2015; Houtenville & Ruiz, 2016
4. Callahan et al., 2009; Kluesner et al., 2005.
5. Harvey et al., 2013.
7. Hagner et al., 1996; Owens & Young, 2008; Luecking et al., 2004.
9. Migliore et al., 2012; Migliore et al., 2010.
12. Inge et al., 2009.
13. Hall et al., 2014.

References


What is the RRTC on Advancing Employment?

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) conducts research on state-level policy and practice around integrated employment. In 2014, ICI received a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), to develop the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Advancing Employment for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The purpose of this research is to identify strategies to support state agencies, providers, advocates, individuals and families to make the philosophy of Employment First a reality.
Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Advancing Employment for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is a project of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston. ThinkWork! is a resource portal offering data, personal stories, and tools related to improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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