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LaunchAbility Academy Training Program (TX): On-Site Training to Improve Employment Outcomes

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Background:

LaunchAbility is a CRP that serves people with IDD in several locations throughout North Texas. LaunchAbility's employment services program offers placement exclusively in the community.

The LaunchAbility Academy Training Program was established in collaboration with the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) as a way to engage employers and prepare job seekers for employment. Program administrators at LaunchAbility developed the Academy model inspired by their work with Walgreens and the Project Search program <http://www.projectsearch.us/>.

The Academy offers a combination of on-site direct work experience and workplace culture, etiquette, and behavior training (also known as soft skills) to people with IDD. The goal of the Academy is to train people to work in growing companies, doing jobs that require high skill levels and attention to detail.

Implementation:

LaunchAbility has a ten-person employment services team that conducts presentations at schools, transition fairs, and other community events.

During these presentations, employment staff introduce the Academy's training model to students with IDD and their families. Interested students then approach their DARS counselors for a referral to the Academy. DARS counselors may also recommend the Academy to individuals with whom they work.

Next, employment staff invites the students to attend an assessment at LaunchAbility that includes a group interview and a chance to learn about the tasks they will be asked to complete at the host employer's site.

Collaborating employers who host the Academy training sessions include Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Texas, the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, and AT&T. Businesses that sell products and services to these companies also host Academy training sessions.

The Academy training takes place about five times a year. The program is different every time because a different employer hosts each session. Potential participants may either be accepted into the next Academy session, deferred to a future session that fits better with their interests, or determined to be a better fit for community placement through the supported employment model.

Individuals who are accepted to the Academy participate in a five- to six-week training program. From the first day, the training takes place at the host employer's site.

A typical day begins with learning tasks in a real work setting, with job coach support; next, trainees attend an afternoon class session where a soft skill, such as asking for clearer directions on a task, is taught. Lastly, trainees apply the new skill in the work environment.

At the end of each day, the job coach and trainee separately evaluate how the trainee did on the tasks and skills learned. This gives the trainee experience receiving feedback and evaluating himself or herself, and offers the opportunity to apply the feedback and improve performance.

Trainees work thirty hours per week for the first two weeks, and then increase to forty hours per week for the last three to four weeks. Trainees graduate with a certificate and are not guaranteed a job, but many graduates have been hired by the host companies.

If open positions are not available for all graduates, LaunchAbility provides job-search support to graduates who meet the eligibility requirements of remaining in the area served by the agency, and continuing to meet the hiring standards of prospective employers in the area.

Impact:

The LaunchAbility Academy typically has high graduate placement rates. In the first year of the program, 100% of eligible graduates were hired within six months of program completion, either by the host company or into comparable positions at other companies.

The Academy has trained mostly people of transition age, but adults in their mid 20s through their 50s have also participated and found jobs. The Academy has worked especially well for people who have some previous work experience and some idea about their skills and ideal work environment.

The Academy has also fostered relationships between LaunchAbility and area employers. Employers who have become familiar with quality candidates from LaunchAbility have reached out for job seekers who can fill openings. A few individuals have been placed directly this way without participating in the Academy training.

Suggestions for Replication:

- Integrate strategic outreach activities into training initiatives. The Academy's success is grounded in marketing at schools and other community events, as well as relationship-building with local employers.
- Include instruction on both hard and soft skills into training programs hosted by employers. Trainees with experience learning tasks, as well as interacting with coworkers and evaluating their progress, integrate more easily into competitive jobs.

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