Natural Supports in the Workplace: A Reexamination of Supported Employment

Jan Nisbet
University of New Hampshire

David Hagner
Syracuse University

The purpose of this article is to examine some of the basic premises of supported employment initiatives. In particular, the role of agency-sponsored job coaches in supporting employees with severe disabilities in integrated work environments is discussed. A broader concept of supported employment is proposed, based on studies of the supports and informal interactions characteristic of natural work environments. Alternative support options, entitled the Mentor Option, the Training Consultant Option, the Job Sharing Option, and the Attendant Option, which involve the active participation of supervisors and co-workers, are presented with suggestions for implementation.

DESCRIPTIONS: adults, community integration, employment, integration, job assessment, job placement, natural environment, nonhandicapped peers, supported employment, vocational training

One of the most pressing concerns in the habilitation of adults with severe disabilities is the achievement of integrated community employment. Community employment can be defined as paid work which (a) takes place in natural settings (i.e., settings not designed for special populations) and (b) includes ongoing interactions with other employees, the overwhelming majority of whom neither receive nor provide habilitation services. The definition of a community setting as both a geographic location and a network of interactions conforms to our common understanding of what “community” means (Hunter & Riger, 1986). In addition, it corresponds closely to the meaning of “integrated” employment, where integration is thought of as having a physical and a social component (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 1983).

There is substantial documentation that adults with severe disabilities can achieve community employment (Kiernan & Stark, 1986; Rusch, 1986; Wehman, Hill, Wood, & Parent, 1987). The programs associated with these efforts have become known as supported employment programs. Broadly defined, supported employment is the employment of workers with severe disabilities in community businesses—employment which is made possible and maintained through the provision of support services by a habilitation agency. The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986 recognized supported employment for the first time as a legitimate vocational rehabilitation outcome (P.L. 99-506, Section 103(i)). Any services required to maintain a person with a severe disability in employment are allowable as supported employment services.

Although in principle open-ended, the current practice of supported employment has become embodied in specific program models developed through a number of pioneering demonstration projects. Perhaps the best known are Virginia Commonwealth University’s Project Employability (Revell, Wehman, & Arnold, 1985), Transitional Employment I and II in Vermont (Vogelsberg, 1986), and the Specialized Training Program at the University of Oregon (Boles, Bellamy, Horner, & Mank, 1984). Because these projects achieved far greater success than had previously been considered possible, they have been widely disseminated and replicated, and their specific program elements have almost become synonymous with the term “supported employment.” The key program elements can be outlined as follows:

1. Support services are provided by an agency staff member, known as a job coach, job trainer, job advocate, employment coordinator, or placement and training specialist.

2. Job coaches analyze the job to be performed and then implement systematic instruction and data collection procedures at the work site to teach the required job and related skills.

3. Initially, job coaches remain on site full time with the worker, but as job tasks are mastered by the supported employee, the job coach gradually begins to fade his or her presence, eventually remaining involved through occasional visits and/or telephone contacts.

4. A number of noninstructional interventions are part of the function of the job coach (Moon, Goodall, Barcus, & Brooke, 1985). Examples include: (a) estab-
lishing rapport with supervisors and co-workers; (b) explaining training techniques and involving supervisors and co-workers in training; (c) explaining the worker's disability, background, and behavioral characteristics to co-workers; and (d) encouraging co-workers to socialize with the worker and modeling appropriate ways of doing it. These functions are sometimes referred to as "advocacy."

5. Communication with residences, arranging transportation, and other tasks that occur away from the job site may also be the responsibility of job coaches.

The above model is sometimes called the "supported jobs" model, although the term "job coach model" is more descriptive, since it is only one of many models of support for community employment. Although outstandingly successful in comparison with past efforts, the job coach model has not been an unqualified success. Most problematic has been the moderate rate of job retention. Data from supported employment programs in Virginia (Wehman, 1986), Vermont (Vogelsberg, 1986), Illinois (Lagomarcino, 1986), and Washington State (Moss, Dineen, & Ford, 1986) report job retention of between 44 and 70% after 1 year. Wehman et al. (1987) have reported similar data on a sample of workers with severe disabilities, adding that "job retention of 55% to 60% is not what we would ultimately like to see" (p. 16). Their suggestions for improvement generally involve more and better implementation of the model outlined above; for example, "more systematic intervention and data systems" (p. 15).

In addition to the difficulties in achieving a satisfactory retention rate, several other features of the job coach model can be considered problematic. First, fading the presence of the job coach is a central problem. Any introduction of an outside source of expertise into a company creates dependency (French & Bell, 1984). As a result, job coaches sometimes experience a great deal of difficulty in fading from a job site (Moon et al., 1985; Wehman, Renzaglia, & Bates, 1985). It is also possible for the reverse dependency to occur. In this situation, the job coach becomes dependent on the job site. Although some of the problems associated with fading can be remediated with good staff training and job development, those problems central to the model are not as easily addressed. Second, job coaches may be obstructive and members of the work organization may systematically behave differently when job coaches are present (Rusch & Menchetti, 1981). Among other problems, this invalidates the observational data upon which fading decisions are made. Unpredictable events that occur after external support has faded may cause the loss of a job. Third, job coaches may call attention to and exaggerate the disability of supported employees and contribute to their stigmatization (Dudley, 1983). Job coaching techniques such as using behavioral science procedures unusual within a business setting or explaining workers' disabilities and background to their co-workers may limit the degree of acceptance and social integration that can be achieved (Hagner, 1987). And fourth, the cost effectiveness of long-term support using a job coach on a one-to-one ratio has been questioned (Shaf er, 1986).

For the most part the job coach model parallels the older transitional employment and placement with follow-up models. Although job coach services extend for a longer period and are typically more thorough than in these older models, they still are not sufficient for many persons with severe disabilities. The response all too frequently is to revert to the use of more restrictive employment models such as enclaves, mobile work crews, and bench work assembly (Mank, Rhodes, & Bellamy, 1986).

Perhaps the central difficulty is that the job coach model of supported employment is an extension of principles and techniques developed by disability specialists, largely within special training and rehabilitation environments. These techniques are externally imposed on natural work environments, often based on a very meager and superficial understanding of how those environments function. Since natural work settings are presumed incompetent to provide the training and support required by workers with severe disabilities, the required support is imported from an external source. Even when support services include "advocacy" and when recommendations are made for involving co-workers as trainers and support personnel (e.g., Rusch & Menchetti, 1981; Shaffer, 1986), they are made from a "habilitation-centered" perspective. For example, Shaffer (1986) recommends establishment of structured training sessions for co-workers to teach proper observation, training, and data collection techniques.

An alternative approach would be to start with an examination of the social interactions and supports characteristic of natural work environments prior to considering habilitation techniques. Then support system interventions can be designed to build upon and augment the natural processes and interactions within community businesses rather than replace or short-circuit them. Support models that develop from a close examination of natural work settings are likely to avoid many of the difficulties that constrain the job coach model. The following sections will summarize the findings of research on workplace interactions and supports, some of which are contradictory. It should be noted that there is scant information on interactions and supports in the workplaces that include persons with disabilities. Furthermore, as this country moves to more service-based industries, our understanding of workplace interactions and supports may also change. In light of the existing literature, a series of support options for community employment will be proposed.
Interaction and Support at Work

Social interaction and supports in the workplace have been studied from the perspectives of business management and the sociology of work (Hirszowicz, 1982; Sandler, 1982). Business management is concerned with interaction and support as variables affecting both productivity and job satisfaction. Since the time of the well-known Hawthorne studies (Sundstrom, 1986), concern with the “human side of work” has been a major interest of management literature. The sociology of work was concerned initially with offering a critique of the negative social effects of industrialization, but gradually came to appreciate the complexity and subtlety of workplace social interactions (Hirszowicz, 1982). Despite their differences, both disciplines have accumulated a large body of information about the prevalence, significance, and types of social interactions characteristic of work environments and about some of the variables that govern interactions. Three consistent findings emerge from studies of nonprofessional, nonmanagerial workers: (a) Informal interactions flourish at work, (b) patterns of social interaction vary widely across and within work environments, and (c) some support is available naturally within work environments. In many cases, considerable discrepancies are evident between the view of community work environments prevalent within habilitation literature and available information from studies of work environments.

Informal Interactions Flourish at Work

Informal interactions are “surplus” or additional interactions not required for the performance of a job (Hirszowicz, 1982; Peponis, 1985). They flourish even in settings designed to discourage them. Within the sociology of work, participant observation studies of an automotive assembly plant (Sandler, 1982) and a slaughterhouse (Thompson, 1983) found that workers used numerous forms of informal interaction, including brief comments, gestures, and symbolic acts with shared meaning, informal assistance in completing work, and conversation during breaks and lunchtimes. The functions of these interactions were to (a) relieve boredom and a sense of powerlessness, (b) facilitate completion of group work tasks, and (c) maintain a sense of group cohesion or “culture.” Although work environments vary in the strength of their cultures (Schein, 1985), workers within a variety of settings and occupations share a strong sense of common bond or feelings of unity, established and reinforced by stories, traditions, specialized language, and rites of initiation for new workers. For some, these bonds and informal interactions serve as a base of support and allegiance in jobs that otherwise might be considered undesirable.

Henderson and Argyle (1985) summarized management studies of the prevalence of interactions at work, which showed that between 35 and 90% of work time is spent interacting with others, and that about half (47%) of all workers across a wide range of occupations report spending a “good deal of time” talking to coworkers. The most common type of interactions, in decreasing order of frequency, were: joking, teasing, helping with work, chatting casually, discussing work, having coffee or meals, discussing personal life, asking or giving advice, and teaching or demonstrating work tasks.

The preservation of established social relationships is an important component of job satisfaction (Maynard, 1986; Taslimi, 1980). The results of two natural experiments with job redesign (Lawler, Hackman, & Kaufman, 1973) and plant relocation (Miller & Labovitz, 1973) reinforced this conclusion. In the first study, a telephone company program to increase the autonomy of telephone operators resulted in decreased job satisfaction for the operators because it disrupted established social networks among them and with their supervisors. In the second study, workers allowed to express a preference for working in either of two plants that were built when the company divided into two separate divisions tended to choose the maintenance of established social exchanges such as friendships and information contacts over any other consideration.

In vocational habilitation for persons with severe disabilities, social interactions typically are viewed as the possession of a “repertoire” of discrete skills, with the objective of habilitation to develop and then teach a list of such skills. The methods of data collection are predominately interviews (White, 1986), short-term observation (Agran, 1986), or mere intuition (e.g., Chadsey-Rusch, Karlan, Riva, & Rusch, 1984). The result is a heavy emphasis on formal interactions. Many forms of informal interaction, such as pranks or rites of initiation, frequently have not been identified through these data collection methods. As one example, humor and joking are a central component of interaction in the workplace. Yet in a survey of rehabilitation personnel involved in job placement (Foss & Peterson, 1981), a sense of humor was rated as one of the least important social skills.

Removal of workers with severe disabilities from sheltered settings must also take into account the disruption of existing relationships and supports. If this dimension is overlooked, supported employment efforts may fail due to factors others than the ability to work. Informal interactions in and out of the workplace provide a substantive base of support for persons with or without disabilities.

Patterns of Interaction Vary Widely Across and Within Work Environments

Each individual setting has its own unique patterns of interaction. For example, both Peponis (1985) and Amsel (1986) found a distinctly different pattern of interaction and “culture” within each separate work environment, even when the work performed was sim-
ilar and plants were part of the same company. In-depth data collection techniques such as ethnography are sometimes necessary to understand fully the culture of a workplace (Sathe, 1983; Schein, 1985).

A great deal of habilitation programming emphasizes cross-situational behaviors rather than those unique to particular environments. An example will illustrate this point. In Thompson's study (1983), typical information interactions took the form of a series of short, disjointed comments, spoken very loudly, each comment beginning with the word “hey.” By contrast, Wehman et al. (1985) provide a list of social competencies appropriate for work environments in general. Among other features, one's voice should not be loud, and one's delivery should be smooth and uninterrupted (p. 106). Although such behavior may be appropriate in an office, it would be quite ineffective in an automotive assembly plant.

Persons involved in supported employment efforts must recognize that individual environments and sub-environments call for different degrees, types, and intensities of social interactions.

Support is Available Naturally within Work Environments

Natural support in the workplace includes help with work and personal problems as well as purely expressive support (Burke, Weir, & Duncan, 1976; Mitchell, Billings, & Moos, 1982). The type and amount of support varies widely (Henderson & Argyle, 1985; Kram & Isabella, 1985), partly as a function of physical proximity, position within the formal workflow network (Brass, 1985; Peponis, 1985; Sundstrom, 1986), and length of employment (Garbarro, 1987). Support is provided to workers by their supervisors as well as co-workers. Kaplan and Cowen (1981) found that industrial supervisors spent an average of 2.5 hours per week helping workers with personal problems. The amount of perceived support is positively correlated with the amount of interaction among workers (Kirmeyer & Lin, 1986).

Within vocational services, “support” refers to formal human service intervention into a work setting, rather than to a natural process available to all workers. As a result, natural sources of support may be overlooked in favor of external support supplied by the job coach. Recognition of the availability of natural support can lead to efforts to facilitate rather than supplant natural support networks.

Alternative Models of Job Support

McKnight (1987) and Taylor, Biklen, and Knell (1987) have argued that true integration would be the direct assimilation of persons with severe disabilities into the work force without any intervention from human service professionals. This assimilation would require that employers have the skills necessary to engage in job redesign, accommodations, and adaptation. Because maximal integration of workers with severe disabilities is a relatively new phenomenon, some type of interim system to facilitate employment and support is necessary. This is not to say that some employers have not demonstrated their ability to employ workers with severe disabilities independent of a system of formal services. Clearly, there are numerous examples where this has occurred. However, many employers must overcome the overt and covert messages of the human service professionals that vocational opportunities for workers with disabilities are best provided outside of the mainstream of business and industry.

The increased use of natural supports appears to be one solution to the growing problem of how to effectively provide consistent and ongoing training and follow-up services in integrated work environments. Co-workers frequently become involved with workers with disabilities through contact on a day-to-day basis. Such involvement should be neither ignored nor exploited, but rather assisted and supported. Co-workers may not have all of the skills needed to train a person to perform a job; however, they may be able to support and supervise. Depending on the nature and intensity of support required, co-workers may provide this support and supervision as part of their typical work responsibilities. If the necessary support requires co-workers to perform different responsibilities, some type of remuneration and job restructuring may be warranted. In order to achieve successful community employment for workers with severe disabilities, the availability of natural supports independent of agency personnel must be recognized. A broader concept of support is required that includes (a) the informal support that is available within work environments; (b) the formal support that is a part of the natural business world such as employee training or employee assistance (Mitchell et al., 1985); and (c) external intervention by human service agencies in order to sustain employment. Business management theorists recognize that in order to be successful, external expertise must be coordinated with resources internal to the organization (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1984). Vocational service professionals must see themselves as facilitators rather than as providers. They must realize that their ultimate goal is to put themselves out of business. One way to achieve this is by assisting and possibly paying co-workers and employers to assume the responsibility for supervising and training workers with disabilities.

Obviously, one support model will not be appropriate for every person's needs. A series of different options are required, sufficiently broad and flexible to accommodate a wide variety of individual arrangements. Several general options should be considered in an attempt to match an appropriate support system to a worker with a severe disability. These include at least the following: (a) the Mentor Option, (b) the Training Con-
consultant Option, (c) the Job Sharing Option, and (d) the Attendant Option. There are several features of these models or approaches that are critical to success. First, the overall goal of each should be to identify the natural supports and concomitant interactions in the workplace. Second, the role of the vocational service agency should be to identify and facilitate natural supports rather than to supplant them. Finally, the vocational agency should move from a position of expertise to a position of finding and developing supports and consultation. Clearly, these efforts should negate the fact that we have powerful training technologies that can be used. However, skill acquisition is only one part of the job. Each of these options is further explained below, with guidelines for their use.

The Mentor Option
Throughout the literature on vocational opportunities for adults with disabilities is the notion that co-workers must be involved in the process of employment. For example, Schaefer (1986) suggested that co-workers should be involved in the maintenance of employment and can be reimbursed for their efforts through social or material means. In the Mentor Option, a vocational agency provides initial job development, analysis, and training. However, when the employee has reached a predetermined level of proficiency, a co-worker assumes the role of a mentor. The vocational agency can assist the employer to target a well-matched co-worker and then provide information and back-up support to this mentor. For example, the mentor might require some information regarding a specific intervention strategy if particular issues or problems arise. The mentor may occasionally assist the worker in solving problems, act as a resource when questions arise, or act as a liaison between the employer and the worker’s residence. A training stipend might be offered to the mentor but should not automatically be assumed necessary. This option was used with a young man who needed assistance with gathering his materials and with quality control. A co-worker assisted the employee in performing these job tasks at no cost to the agency or employer. Another involved a young man with a severe behavior disorder that resulted in unpredictable “acting-out,” which was successfully managed with a prompted self-removal strategy. A co-worker who was familiar with the young man assisted him and the other co-workers to deal with these unpredictable episodes.

The Training Consultant Option
In this option, one or more co-workers assume responsibility for training and more intensive support for an employee with a severe disability. Training continues until the employee reaches a set level of productivity, and the co-worker continues to provide ongoing supervision and follow-along services. A consultant from a vocational service agency assists by teaching the co-worker how to provide instruction and ongoing support to the employee. Because not all co-workers initially feel comfortable in assuming this role, the consultant may remain on site for a period of time, gradually transferring responsibility to the co-worker. But the function of the consultant is indirect, geared toward developing the competence of one or more co-workers.

This model usually requires a more formal arrangement between the employer and the vocational service agency, with the amount of instructional and other support time provided by the co-worker carefully documented and reimbursed by the agency. One example is a co-worker who earns $15,000 per year and spends 20% of her time providing instruction, quality control, and transportation. The vocational agency reimburses the company $3,000 ($20 × $15,000) on an annual basis for these services in the form of a stipend from its supported employment funding. Careful documentation is required to ensure that the payment is clearly a training stipend or similar service fee and cannot be misinterpreted as reimbursement of wages, because such reimbursement is not an allowable vocational rehabilitation expenditure. This particular option could be used with any individual with a severe disability. However, the immediate presence of a co-worker recognized through community contacts or a job development strategy to become involved in training would probably be the deciding factor for its selection.

The Job Sharing Option
The Job Sharing Option can be implemented in several ways. Probably the easiest is by means of a prenegotiated arrangement with an employer to hire two persons for one position. The vocational agency recruits a person without a disability to accept a job and provide assistance to a person with a disability as part of the job responsibilities. For example, at a $16,000 per year job, a worker with a disability may receive 25% of the salary as a commensurate wage, based on a productivity study and approval for a special minimum wage from the Department of Labor. The nondisabled co-worker would receive the remaining 75% or $12,000 from the company and an additional $4,000 annual stipend from the vocational agency to provide the required assistance. The stipend would provide remuneration to the job sharer for providing support services and assuming additional responsibilities and would serve to offset the 25% loss in company wages. Many parents, professionals, employ-
ers, and others know of a person with a severe disability who is in need of very intensive supervision and physical support, for example, in order to work. Such a person could benefit from this approach to employment. He or she may need assistance in completing work tasks, resolving interpersonal conflicts, following the work schedule, or in other related activities such as eating or attending to toileting or hygiene needs.

This option can also be implemented by targeting a co-worker in the environment after training has begun. There are occasions when co-workers take an interest in employees with severe disabilities and would want to function as a job sharer. However, it is risky to assume that a co-worker will want to become involved in this way, particularly if it would require a change in the nature of his or her job responsibilities. But commitment can be cultured (Provençal, 1987), and this method, although less controlled, is a possibility.

The Attendant Option

Persons involved in the independent living movement have suggested that an attendant can be used to provide on-the-job support to workers with severe physical disabilities. This option is particularly appropriate when the required support involves medical and personal care needs that can be funded under current Medicaid regulations. A major difference between the attendant model and the job coach model is that an attendant is hired by the person with a disability rather than by a vocational agency, resulting in a consumer-driven approach. The attendant is primarily responsible to the employee rather than to an agency. Fading from the situation may take place but is not necessarily assumed and is under the control of the employee with a disability. Persons with severe disabilities may require assistance from a friend or family member to hire the most appropriate person, and this should be included as part of the approach.

In addition to personal care services, an attendant could also provide vocational assistance. For example, an employee with a severe physical disability might require assistance in making phone calls. Because Medicaid funding traditionally has not been used for this purpose, a vocational agency could provide a stipend to the attendant. Obviously, the worker with a disability would have to approve the use of the attendant. Another possibility for payment of an attendant is direct payment by the employee with a disability as an impairment-related expense. Such an expense can be deducted from the employee’s earnings in calculating Supplemental Security Income. In many cases, this could result in no loss in actual income.

Conclusion

In many cases, the job coach model provides an appropriate form of job support. However, it should be regarded as only one of a series of support options for community employment. Four alternative options have been outlined, suitable for many workers currently excluded from individualized community jobs. The support provided by a vocational agency is more indirect and unobtrusive than in the job coach model, relying to a greater extent on natural supports available or facilitated within the workplace, and targeting interventions for specific identified discrepancies between the supports required and those naturally available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Support person/role</th>
<th>Responsible to</th>
<th>Agency role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job coach</td>
<td>Job coach trains</td>
<td>Coach fades; worker is presumed independent</td>
<td>Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>Job coach trains; supervision is transferred to mentor</td>
<td>Mentor remains on-site, providing support and supervision</td>
<td>Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training consultant</td>
<td>Job coach trains with the co-workers/supervisor</td>
<td>Co-workers/supervisor provide support, supervision, and additional training</td>
<td>Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job sharing</td>
<td>Job coach identifies job sharer, then trains and assists</td>
<td>Job sharer remains on-site</td>
<td>Agency and company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendant</td>
<td>Attendant trains and assists (may need some assistance from job coach)</td>
<td>Attendant remains on-site at worker’s discretion</td>
<td>Worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some of the main features and desired outcomes of each support model are presented in Table 1.

It should be emphasized that these are only a few of the options for job support that could be developed. They represent a starting point for innovation and research rather than a comprehensive listing. Furthermore, there are technical problems involved in the implementation of each option that require attention. For example, job sharing may complicate the provision of fringe benefits by an employer, the use of an attendant may create insurance liability issues, co-workers may leave their jobs, some co-workers may turn out to be undesirable mentors, and issues related to horizontal and vertical job enhancement will have to be resolved. Clearly, these are problems and issues that will need to be resolved around individual workers, co-workers, and employers.

Similar to any supported employment, there are desirable outcomes. The most obvious of these outcomes is an equitable, individualized, and paid job in a valued and integrated workplace. Other desirable outcomes include job retention, job satisfaction, personal relationships with co-workers, the presence of commitment by co-workers and employers to provide paid or unpaid supervision and support, low turnover among co-workers providing support, decreased dependence on vocational service personnel, and improved competence and commitment of community businesses to employ individuals with severe disabilities.

Finally, the alternatives presented here should not be construed as a new kind of “continuum of services.” Each option provides a support mechanism for individualized community employment within natural work environments. One option might be more appropriate for particular workers or particular work environments, depending on individual needs and circumstances. It is these needs that should dictate the amount and kind of intervention provided by human service professionals, rather than adherence to one or more arbitrary models of support. Bogdan and Taylor (1987) emphasize this concept:

Just because an idea, model, or approach seems to work in one place at one time does not mean that it can work anywhere or at any time. To be sure, we can all learn good ideas from other people and some models are inherently superior to others. We cannot assume, however, that every good idea can be replicated with equal success. We all know there is a difference between having a home-cooked meal and eating in a franchise restaurant. What makes the difference is not the recipe, but the care, attention, and personal touch that go into the cooking. (pp. 212–213)

References


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