

# Expanding the Job and Career Options for People with Significant Disabilities

Jo-Ann Sowers, Patty Cotton, and Joanne Malloy  
University of New Hampshire, New Hampshire, USA

*Through supported employment many individuals with significant learning disabilities are working in community employment situations. However, the vast majority of these individuals have been placed into cleaning-related jobs, which are low paid, low status, and physically demanding. These characteristics contribute to the difficulties of maintaining employees in the jobs. This paper discusses the need to expand the vision of the type of jobs and careers which individuals with disabilities are facilitated to pursue. Specific approaches are delineated that will contribute to individuals with significant learning disabilities having access to the full array of career opportunities.*

Tracy is a 19-year-old woman who experiences a significant learning disability. Tracy attends her local high school where, through the special education program, she spent a portion of her day for several years in a number of unpaid community work experiences. All of these work experiences involved cleaning tasks. When she was 18 years of age, she was referred to an adult service, supported employment agency for assistance in finding a paid job. Soon after referral, the agency learned of a job opening at a restaurant, performing cleaning tasks. Given Tracy's past work experience it was felt that she could easily learn the tasks, and, thus, it would be a good job match. A job coach trained Tracy how to do her job, which she learned to perform within a few weeks. After the job coach no longer came to the job site daily, Tracy began to have problems both in the quality and productivity of her work. She also had problems taking direction and feedback from her supervisor. The job coach returned to the site to "retrain" her, her performance improved, and the job coach left the site. However, in a few weeks she began to have difficulties again. The pattern continued for several months, until the employer became frustrated and fired her.

Until recently, work in a sheltered program was the only employment option available to most individuals with significant learning disabilities. Over the past decade, through supported employment, tens of thousands of individuals with these disabilities have obtained jobs in regular businesses (West, Revell, & Wehman, 1992). Without question, supported employment has been one of the most important innovations in the history of disability services. However, key characteristics of Tracy's story are not uncommon for many individuals who have obtained jobs through supported employment, including that she was placed in a cleaning job, she was trained by a job coach, she had on-going performance problems that appears to be related more to motivation than her ability to do the job, and she lost her job (Mank, 1994; McGaughney, Kiernan, McNally, & Gilmore, 1993; Melda, Agosta, & Brown, 1993).

The greatest challenge faced by supported employment agencies has been maintaining individuals in jobs without high levels of on-going staff support. Job loss estimates in supported employment range from 44% to 70% (Nisbet & Hagner, 1988). Group placement models (e.g., crews and enclaves) continue to be used as a means to provide supports less expensively (McGaughney, Keirnan, McNally, Gilmore, & Keith, 1994). Waiting lists for supported employment services grow because of the continuing need for job coaches to spend time at job sites.

The type of jobs in which many individuals in supported employment are placed may be one major reason for job maintenance difficulties. The vast majority of these individuals are placed into cleaning-related jobs such as washing dishes in restaurants, cleaning rooms in motels, and janitorial duties in a variety of businesses (O'Brien, 1990; West, et al., 1992). These are jobs that are highly physically demanding, low paying, low status, have limited opportunity for advancement, and provide few intellectual or creative challenges. It is not surprising that these are jobs for which there is a very high turnover of employees without disabilities. It should be no surprise that many individuals with disabilities also are not particularly motivated to keep these jobs.

Supported employment programs are judged based on the number of individuals they place, while little emphasis is placed on the quality of the

jobs. Much attention has been given to agencies making good “job matches”. However, the primary criterion for a good job match is that it is one the individual, given his or her current skills, can easily and quickly

learn. Cleaning-related jobs are those which are both easiest to find and the easiest for an individual with a cognitive disability to learn.

Through research and common experience we know that job performance is greatly influenced by the level of an employee's job satisfaction (Moseley, 1988). There are many factors that contribute to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction including wage amount, status, perceiving that the work makes a contribution to others, being challenged intellectually and creatively, believing that others perceive the job as important, and opportunities for social connections with coworkers (Friedman, 1964; Hallie, 1984; Locke, 1983). Supported employment continues to take few, if any, of these factors into account in determining an appropriate job match or in assisting individuals to pursue careers (Hagner & Dileo, 1993; Mank, 1994; McGaughney, 1993; Moseley, 1988).

### **New Vision and Opportunities**

Supported employment must now move toward an expanded vision of the types of jobs and career options that individuals with significant disabilities have the opportunity to pursue and access. This change in focus will be driven by a belief that individuals with significant learning disabilities have both the capacity and right to pursue valued careers and that it is no longer enough that these individuals get a job, any job. Rather than continuing to judge supported employment programs based primarily on the number of individuals placed onto jobs, a shift must be made to focus on the quality of jobs (O'Brien, 1990). Critical quality indicators are those associated with job satisfaction for all individuals including status, wage, contribution to others, and the opportunity to learn new skills.

This change must be reflected in and reinforced by the supported employment regulations and funding streams. In the US, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992 contain language that notes the need for "meaningful careers" that are "based on informed choice". However, State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies typically provide only minimal funding for career planning, job exploration, and job development efforts. The vast majority of funding is currently allocated

for services (i.e., usually job coaching) after the individual is placed in a job. If time and effort are put into comprehensive career planning and development that assists individuals to identify and obtain quality jobs,

the cost effectiveness of supported employment services will be enhanced. When an individual loses or leaves a job, not only are the dollars expended on finding and training that job wasted, but additional funds will need to be paid to place the person in another job. Supported employment is beginning to move away from a reliance on agency job coaches for training and supporting employees toward facilitating and consulting with coworkers to provide this training and support (Hagner & Dileo, 1993). Again, the difficulties in maintaining individuals in jobs is the basis for this new approach. It is recognized that when the job coach provides the training, the supported employee often becomes dependent on the job coach and do not perceive that they have the skills or ability to train or support the employee with the disability. When staff serve as consultants rather than direct trainers, the funds currently spent on costly job coaching services will be saved, enabling a greater share of supported employment dollars to be expended for career planning and development efforts.

These perspectives should not be interpreted as a suggestion that fewer dollars be allocated for supported employment services. In fact, additional funds need to be made available to assist individuals who have typically been served through supported employment to pursue and obtain quality careers. Other individuals in need of "rehabilitation" routinely can access a wide array of services (e.g., college, technical training programs), which often are much more costly than supported employment. These individuals are perceived to be capable of performing sophisticated jobs, and, thus, require education and training to obtain these jobs. The types of services offered to people with more significant disabilities, as well as the dollars allocated for services directly reflects our perceptions of the capacity and right of these individuals to have equal access to the full spectrum of career opportunities.

## New Approaches

In order to fulfill the vision of greater career opportunities for people with significant disabilities, supported employment agencies need to expand the strategies and approaches that are used. In this section, four key suggestions are made that reflect a new approach to career planning and development.

Start with interests. Career planning should start with and focus on interests in facilitating individuals with disabilities in identifying a career path. Career facilitators should first assist individuals to identify general areas in which they have talents and interests—sports, music, animals, books and literature, art, clothes, hair and make-up, cars, children, cooking, computers, the theater, flowers and gardening, politics, and so on. Next, individuals should be facilitated to identify specific talents and interests—taking care of others, greeting and socializing with people, convincing people to do something, doing things in a precise and organized way, remembering facts, doing things alone, working as a team, and so on.

Explore different job and career areas. Using the information about the person's interests and capacities, a number of different possible job or career areas can be identified for the person to explore. For example, John has a strong interest in sports. What are some of the possible jobs and careers that one could do related to sports? Here are just a few examples: at a health club (working in the front office in a clerical position, recruiting new members, assisting as a trainer in fitness classes), in a sports department of a newspaper or television station (helping to write stories, keeping computer files or sports data), at a sporting good store or department (working as a sales assistant or inventory specialist), at a sporting goods manufacturing business (working in the office, in production or in sales). Sue does not have a specific area of interest, but has a particular capacity and desire to help and teach others. What possible career areas might be worth exploring with her? These areas include working with children at a day care or as a teacher's assistant at a school, with the elderly as a personal assistant, in an advocacy agency or

information and referral office giving information and advice to people, or as a customer service assistant in a department store.

Providing verbal descriptions and written information (for those who can read) can be helpful for some individuals. However, for most people, and often to a greater extent for people with significant learning disabilities, hearing or reading about occupations is not enough for them to gain a good idea of what an occupation is really all about. Opportunities need to be provided for them to spend time at companies where different jobs are performed, observing the jobs, talking with the employees, and even a brief period of time performing the work. Through this process the individual can be assisted to identify the type of education, knowledge, and skills that will help him or her to obtain a job in a particular job or career area.

Provide the person with the opportunity to access typical education and training opportunities. Supported employment has focused on training individuals on the job and de-emphasized educational and training opportunities aimed at preparing individuals for future careers and jobs. This focus is a reaction to the philosophy that was the basis for sheltered workshops. Individuals were kept in these programs until they learned all the skills thought necessary to be “ready” for employment. Of course, few people ever were “ready”. Individuals with disabilities should not have to stay in training for which their current skills qualify them. They should be able to obtain the support needed to access educational and training opportunities available to others who wish to enhance their career options. Through high schools these options include vocational education courses and regular cooperative education and work study programs. College, adult vocational technical training programs, and apprenticeships are among the options that all adults should be able to access.

Develop access to job opportunities in a wide variety of career areas, Assisting individuals with significant disabilities to obtain employment in other areas will be more difficult than continuing to make placements in cleaning jobs. The number of jobs in other areas are fewer and the competition for them is greater. To meet this challenge, job developers (career facilitators) will need to greatly expand the strategies they use to develop jobs beyond answering want ads and “cold calls”. There is evidence that when creative strategies are used, higher quality jobs can be found for individuals with severe disabilities. Two particularly insightful

demonstrations occurred with individuals who experienced both significant learning and physical disabilities (Callahan, 1991; Sowers & Powers, 1991). Because of the severity of the physical disabilities experienced by the individuals in these projects, cleaning was not a viable

job for most of them. With this option removed, staff had no alternative but to develop jobs in other areas. These projects were successful in placing consumers into a variety of other job areas such as in computer, clerical, and sales occupations.

Most quality jobs are not advertised in the newspaper, but are filled by a person who finds out about a job through an acquaintance. One important strategy is to actively identify and use the personal connections of the job seeker. In addition, career facilitators should focus a significant portion of their time and effort on developing their own connections with and knowledge of local businesses. The first step in building these connections is to approach the employer, not for a job, but for an opportunity to find out more about the company and the type of jobs performed there. Most businesses are willing to spend time giving in-depth descriptions of the company and jobs done there. Additional opportunities should be created to continue to develop a relationship with the company and the key contact person there. One useful strategy is to ask an employer to meet with an individual who may be exploring a career related to the type of work done at the business. Not only will this serve to maintain a general connection with the employer, but it is also an excellent way for a prospective employee who may be interested in working at the company to get his or her foot in the door. Through these on-going interactions the employer and facilitator will get to know each other and the facilitator will gain a good understanding of the jobs done at the company. The facilitator will also learn about things like how new employees are trained, how much support is provided to employees, and which supervisors are particularly supportive.

Job creation had been found to be a successful strategy by many supported employment agencies (Sowers, 1991). Using this approach, a job task list is created that is different from existing position descriptions and duties at a company. This strategy evolved from the fact that a person

may not be able to do all of the tasks involved in a job as currently defined, but can do one or more tasks from a number of jobs. Employers are often willing to create jobs in this way, because they actually find it to be more efficient. For example, a job was created for Darcy by a bank to perform cheque microfilming and other support duties that had been done by tellers. The tellers had found it difficult to get all of these tasks done in

addition to their work with customers. The bank administration found that by hiring Darcy, it did not need to hire another teller or to pay tellers to work overtime.

After losing her job at the restaurant, Tracy had the opportunity to gain assistance from a Career Facilitator who focused on assisting her to explore, identify, and pursue a career path in which she had genuine interest. The Career Facilitator spent many hours with Tracy alone and with Tracy and her mother. Many of these “get togethers” took place around the kitchen table at Tracy’s home, while others were at a restaurant over a cup of coffee. At one point in the discussion, Tracy’s mother said, I know this is not possible, but Tracy would love to work with animals.” Tracy’s face lit up and she nodded in agreement. Tracy had no work experience involving animals, and, in fact, had relatively little personal experience with them. However, she thought she would like to work with animals. The facilitator assisted Tracy to explore different occupations related to animals, including those in pet shops, vet’s offices, and pet grooming businesses. Tracy was interested in all of these, but particularly in becoming a groomer. Possible ways to gain training and experience in this area were explored. It turned out that her high school’s vocational education program had courses in animal care, including basic dog grooming skills. The instructor was hesitant about having someone with a significant learning disability in the class, but was willing to give it a try with curriculum modification assistance and support. She is enrolled in the course and doing well. The facilitator suggested that it might be useful for Tracy to get additional hands-on experience through an apprenticeship arrangement with a business. Through a personal connection of a school staff member, a local dog groomer was approached about training Tracy. Tracy works about 10 hours a week at the grooming shop. The owner spends about half of this time giving direct instruction and feedback to Tracy. The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation pays the groomer for these hours of training. When Tracy first began her job, she struggled in performing basic tasks, including “convincing” a dog to stay in the

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bath tub while being shampooed. After several months, Tracy can do many of the "rough" grooming tasks including shampooing, brush-outs, and nail clipping. The facilitator spends time at the site discussing with the owner how Tracy is doing and giving suggestions and input about the training. The owner has committed to helping Tracy obtain a grooming certificate and to establish a rough grooming service, through which she would work for several groomers.

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Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Jo-Ann Sowers, University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability, Concord Center, 10 Ferry Street, #14, Concord, New Hampshire, 03301.

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