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Abstract

This paper, presented by Jane Baxter at an Open Employment Forum In Brisbane, discusses the procedures used by Workscope, an open employment agency for people who have high support needs. Baxter emphasises the issue of choice for the people who used their service, and explains that they borrowed heavily from John O'Brien's personal futures planning approach. The paper runs through the way Workscope was implemented and how it meets the needs of its clients. **Keyword: Employment**

***“Ensuring informed choice
by consumers in an
Individual Supported Jobs
Service.”***

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Workscope began operations in April of 1990 as the first section 10 service in Qld funded under the supported individual jobs model of the disability services act.

It was established to work with people with significant disabilities whose needs for employment support are ongoing. The CETP services had proved very successful in placing people with mild intellectual disabilities into open employment for award wages. The challenge for Workscope was to place in open employment people with higher support needs.

The procedures used by Workscope are similar to those used by CETP services. Very simply the procedures get down to three major steps:

1. Getting to know the persons' skills, interests and abilities
2. Searching for a job in open employment, which match those interests and abilities.
3. Supporting the person once placed with training to learn the tasks and help to fit in socially.

It was envisaged that Workscope would work with people who have no other daytime activity.

What I would like to talk about today are two of the major issues we have dealt with in the implementation of this new service. Basically they can be summarised in one word - CHOICE. That is: How do we ensure that the people we work with, most of whom have significant disabilities and communication difficulties, are making informed decisions about the priorities in their lives and secondly, if work is a major goal, how to enable people to make informed choices about the types of work in which they are interested and skilled.

The first of these issues became obvious to Workscope staff as we began interviewing job seekers. Many were referred by the State Governments' service providers and from local hostels.

In a number of instances Workscope staff were concerned about the level of commitment to the idea of getting a job in the people themselves. It seemed rather higher in the people who had referred them, seeking daytime activities for people who had no other options.

Also, in spending time with and getting to know those referred it became obvious that for most people with significant disabilities there is a myriad of issues in their lives. We discovered that people were very unhappy where they lived, or were taking a cocktail of medication, which hadn't been recently reviewed, or had to move home against their will. It was almost as though they had been referred to Workscope as a panacea – the thinking being that “even though they may hate where they're living, and the medication needs review - which is all a bit hard, at least they might be able to get a job”. Well, it doesn't work that way. It has been well documented that for people

to be successful in holding down a job there are a number of pre requisites, like a stable supportive home base from which to take this major step, and motivation to work. (Brickey, Campbell and Browning, 1986; Hill, Wehman, Hill, Goodall, 1986; Salzberg, Linkin, McConaughy, Lignugaris/Kraft, 1986)

So, it appeared that for many of the people interviewed the issues in their lives were complex and intertwined, and we knew that work would not cure all other ills. As Workscope was one of the few agencies for which these people were eligible it was obvious that we had to come up with a method by which people could look at all the issues in their lives and make decisions about which were the most important right now.

Borrowing heavily from John O'Brien's personal futures planning approach (O'Brien, Mount and Lyle O'Brien, 1988) we came up with work plan meetings. Features are as follows:

1. The meeting involves all the significant people in the job seekers life i.e. people who will have some influence in the achievement of a quality life. Obviously the work plan meeting is not conducted in the first week of our contact with a job seeker as it takes time to identify the issues and the key people. This includes parents; service providers; doctors; neighbours; friends; lovers etc.
2. The job seeker chooses the people to attend the meeting and it is conducted in a place where they feel most comfortable.
3. It is important that the job seeker has access to an independent advocate, unrelated to family or service providers to ensure they have the confidence and opportunity to fully participate in the planning process.
4. The aim is to identify all the major issues in the person's life. They may range from where the person lives; where they currently work; relationships with family; friendship or lack of them; recreation; health and medication; relationship to members of the opposite sex; further education; access to independent advocacy etc.

It is not Workscope's intention to attempt to meet all the needs, which arise. The idea is to table everything so participants have shared knowledge of the issues facing the person and can develop a joint approach to problem solving.

5. Issues raised are placed in order of importance. It is vital that the person with a disability identifies the priorities. Each is then addressed separately.
6. For each issue an action plan is written. Steps necessary for reaching particular goals are identified. As noted before it is not Workscope's aim to solve all problems, but to put the person in touch with others who will have some influence in their achieving a quality life. A time frame is also set and agreement reached about how we will know that success has been achieved.
7. At the end of the meeting the job seeker is encouraged to talk about how they would like their life to be in two years time - where they would live, with whom,

where they would work and recreate. With input from others in the meeting this is developed into a shared vision of the person's future and an undertaking made to work together towards this vision.

While this is not an easy process the outcomes have been very positive. People with disabilities and their families have commented how valuable it is to look at a whole vision for the person and then break it down into manageable steps, identifying where work fits into the over all picture. For all participants awareness grows that work will not be achieved separately from or in spite of, all the other issues. Getting a job in open employment influences and is influenced by many other factors which all need to be planned for. Often when looking at the over all picture of the person's life it is obvious that a number of other areas need to be addressed before getting a job is tackled. We would suggest that generally people need to be fairly happy where they live and have stable medication before they will be able to launch into open employment successfully. This is not to say that Workscope will withdraw its service, but rather that our role can be planned for in the over all time frame of accomplishment for the person. It helps Workscope balance demands and allocate resources for times when our input will be required.

One more very important outcome is that the person is enabled to control the process and choose which issue is tackled first. For one young woman, becoming engaged was much more important than work; others choose to participate in a particular course before looking for work; and for many the immediate need is accommodation of their choice. By looking at the whole of the person's life, each aspect can be planned for and an overall vision established.

This type of planning process is used frequently in organisations in transition and those previously providing whole of life services. We should suggest it is also important for single focus service providers, especially those working with people with high support needs...just as an aside, all these issues have been documented by others across Australia and overseas as needing to be addressed in order for the person to be successful in open employment. (Bellamy, Rhodes, Mank, Albin, 1988; Hasazi and Clark, 1988; Turnbull and Turnbull, 1988). This has ramifications for funding bodies who tend to favour particular service types in (tri ennium) funding releases. The recently announced increase in monies to commonwealth funded employment services will be most beneficial to people with disabilities who have access to the accommodation of their choice. For those who don't have that stable home base no amount of funding to employment services will result in quality job outcomes until accommodation issues are addressed.

But back to the topic.

When an individual makes a decision that work is the most important goal right now, our next duty is to ensure the job seeker makes an informed choice about the types of work in which they are interested.

People we meet have very little experience with the employment market upon which to base choices. For people who have spent all their working life in sheltered Workshops, or who have spent most of their time at home with no day time activities there is definitely a need for a vehicle through which to learn about work options.

Workscope has taken up the lead from Dr Barbara Wilcox, of Indiana University, who visited Australia recently. She speaks of allowing special school leavers to sample jobs so they can make an accurate selection of those, which interest them. Workscope has developed a number of jobs sampling sites, which are based within regular industry. We targeted industries in which it was likely that people may realistically get paid work. Employers in various industries were approached and negotiations were carried out to identify tasks, which the job seekers could perform over 2 days. The tasks were structured into two full day's work. It was seen as very important that people got a realistic feel of what that particular job was like, hence its very structured nature. Obviously it was also necessary to avoid fulfilling duties which would normally constitute a paid position. So we looked for bits of tasks which no one quite got around to doing. We also wanted it to be a benefit to other workers, rather than a hindrance, when the Workscope people turned up. So we ensured that none of the other workers actually relied upon our getting the task done for them to be able to do, their job. An example is in a motel where the task is room cleaning. Rather than have our job seeker going from room to room doing a particular task with the other cleaners, who may slow them down we negotiated to be responsible for the thorough cleaning of one room. This means that it is an advantage to the other cleaners when we come because they have one less room to clean. While the skills of the various people will vary we ensure that the work we have negotiated will always be done, even if that is by the Workscope staff member. All these arrangements were considered necessary to ensure a mutually beneficial working relationship between Workscope and these employers in the long run.

The next major obstacle was that of insurance. It is extremely difficult and costly to insure no paid workers as our long suffering insurance broker discovered. There was also the legal difficulty of any agency arranging work experience needing to be registered under the work experience act. These two issues looked like major hurdles, but we persisted because of the belief in the value and necessity of job sampling to enable people to make informed choices.

An approach was made to Gateway TAFE College who was more than happy to co-operate. The arrangement negotiated is as follows: Workscope job seekers enrol in a course called Industry Training. The major Component of the course is the job sampling at sites arranged by Workscope. A theory component is being developed which will include occupational health and safety information and work place functional literacy etc. recognising safety signs etc. Participants will be awarded with a certificate of attainment in Industry Skills.

Workscope is very appreciative of the co-operation shown by Gateway TAFE. We also see it as appropriate to have this pre-placement activity located in a Tertiary education institution such as TAFE. So just to recap, the major features of job sampling are as follows:

FROM THE JOB SEEKER'S PERSPECTIVE

1. Job Seeker chooses whether or not to participate and at how many different sites.

2. Job Seeker has the opportunity to try the tasks and experience the atmosphere of various different work settings.
3. Job Seeker makes an informed choice about the types of work in which they are interested and skilled.
4. Certificate of Attainment in “Industry Skills”.

FROM THE EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE

1. Job Sampling involves regular tasks typical of that Industry performed in ordinary work settings.
2. A set of specific tasks is negotiated and a guarantee given that these will be completed.
3. Not doing work, which would normally make up a paid position.
4. No other staff is dependent upon the job seekers performance in order to get their own work done.
5. Good opportunity for employer to learn about the employability of people with disabilities.
6. Full insurance cover offered through TAFE work experience insurance policy.

In practice the job sampling has proved very successful. While the major reason for it is to give job seekers access to experience and information which will help them decide about job options, it is also a opportunity for Workscope staff to Measure people's work related skills in a real work setting. It is an opportunity to gain an idea about the job seekers skills and interests; accuracy and speed of work; Concentration and attention to task; ability to understand and retain instructions; problem solving abilities etc.

Through actually doing a job, feeling the atmosphere etc job seekers have been able to eliminate some jobs which they thought they were interested in and discover hidden talents or interests they were unaware of. People get the chance to decide about which sorts of jobs they are likely to be successful in, which is more desirable than a service provider or parent passing judgement on people's ambitions.

The first 10 months of operation for Workscope have been challenging and exciting. We have very much enjoyed getting to know some job seekers and learning from them ways to guide the development of the service.

Some of the original ideas and concepts have changed and procedures have been streamlined, in response to the complex nature of the needs of people we meet. As long as the service remains dynamic and is driven by the choices of the individual for who we are job searching then Workscope will be on the right track.

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