Supporting Individuals with Significant Disabilities: The Roles of a Job Coach

INTRODUCTION

The person who assists individuals with disabilities to find and maintain employment using supported employment services has been referred to by a number of different titles. This includes such titles as employment specialist, employment consultant, personal representative, job developer, job-site trainer, and job coach. Regardless of the title, a job coach wears many different hats when supporting an individual in finding and maintaining employment.

The most important roles are those associated with supporting an individual with a disability in finding "real work for real pay", while also providing valuable services to businesses (Wehman, Inge, Revell, & Brooke 2007). As such, a job coach has two customers: the individual with a disability and the employer who will hire the job seeker. These two roles require unique and different skills. A job coach must have the ability to represent the job seeker as a valuable asset to businesses while also being able to identify and facilitate the necessary supports for the individual to become a successful employee.

Some Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) choose to divide these roles into two positions: one of job developer and one of job coach. This can be problematic in that the job developer may know the skills and needs of the individual with a disability, while the job coach may not fully understand the needs of the business. As such, CRPs must realize that splitting the roles of a job coach into multiple positions can create issues that need to be identified and resolved.

This fact sheet discusses the roles of job coaches who work in supported employment programs. The information is presented with the assumption that the job coach who is supporting the job seeker with a disability is also representing this individual to the business. Hopefully, job coaches will use this resource to assist individuals with disabilities in achieving integrated employment outcomes. Additional resources can be found online at VCU's CRP-RCEP website: http://www.crp-rcep.org.

Key Points

- Job coaches must be able to assist the jobseeker in identifying personal interests, which lead to a job of choice in the community.

- Job coaches must understand the business community and how individuals with disabilities add value to the workplace.

- Job coaches must identify workplace supports that assist the individual with a disability in becoming employed today instead of requiring the individual to get ready for a job someday!

JOB COACH ROLES AND STRATEGIES

1. Is able to identify the individual's interests in order to facilitate a job/career of choice.

All too often, the labor market "drives" the job search rather than the job seeker's interests. Offering a job in food service, because these jobs are readily available, to an individual who does not want to work in food service is an example of the labor market "driving" job development. Of course there are specific businesses that exist within any given community and need to be considered. But, if a person is not interested in a particular type of work, he or she is less likely to be successfully employed for the long term.

Strategies: The job coach must get to know the job seeker by spending time with him or her in the community. Getting to know what "makes the individual tick" or makes him or her excited is important! For example, the job coach and the job seeker might go shopping, eat at a restaurant, attend a movie, go to a sporting event, meet at the individual's home, or simply drive around the neighborhood to discuss the local businesses. During these activities, the job coach can learn a lot about the job seeker. How does the person like to spend time? What is important to the individual? Are there any particular non-negotiables related to employment?

Asking significant others in the individual's life what is important related to work also can be important and helpful. The information can be gathered using person-centered planning meetings or activities or less formally through conversations. The person should always be included and confirm that these ideas are of interest for employment.

A key point to remember is that individuals with disabilities often will be more comfortable and open if the meetings and activities occur in locations of the individual's choice rather than at the CRP. This is true even if the person has a long history of being served in the organization's facility-based program. Getting out in the community will allow the job coach to see a totally different side to the individual and provide valuable information.

2. Is able to identify the individual's skills and talents in order to facilitate a job/career of choice.

Getting to know the individual also gives the job coach an opportunity to observe the jobseeker's abilities and create a visual image of his or her support needs. This is much more valuable than the scores that the person makes on a standardized test! For example, the job coach could learn about the person's physical abilities, social skills, money use, time keeping, functional academic skills among numerous other things.

Strategies: Suppose the job coach and the individual go out to a restaurant and talk about employment opportunities. While there, the job coach not only can learn about the individual's interests but also skills and support needs. Does the individual arrive with or without assistance by taking public or private transportation? Does someone have to come with the person to the appointment? Does the individual arrive on time and is dressed appropriately? This is important to note even if family members or residential support staff bring the person, which may provide insight on the supports available to the individual.

Once there, what support does the individual need? This could include such things as ordering, eating, using the restroom, moving around the restaurant, social skills, paying for the food, and

so forth. This type of functional assessment in community settings can be used when analyzing potential work settings that will match or closely match the individual's skill level. The closer the match, the better chance the person will be successful and the less training that will be needed for the individual to be independent.

3. Is able to negotiate customized jobs for individuals with disabilities.

Some individuals who need supported employment services will not be able to qualify for existing jobs or may have very unique talents. In these instances, job coaches must be able to negotiate or work with employers to customize positions. Customized employment can benefit both the individual with a disability and the business. The employment specialist must be prepared to identify these potential benefits when working with the business community.

Strategies: Business can benefit from customizing positions in a number of ways. For instance, a business may have work that is not getting done or is not currently assigned to an employee. These job duties could "customized" to match the skills and interests of an individual with a disability. And, businesses may save money by customizing jobs if they are paying overtime to staff for task completion. Identify ways that a job might be customized when conducting a job analysis or talking with an employer. Some of the strategies that have been used to customize jobs include the following.

- The job duties in one job description might be divided into two or more positions resulting in a customized position for a specific job seeker.

- Tasks that are not being done or not done often enough might be identified to negotiate a job description.

- Tasks that employers are paying over-time for may be combined into a position to save the company money while hiring an individual who is interested in these job duties.

- Job duties that take employees away from their areas of expertise may be combined into one position. This may save the employer money and get jobs done more often if an individual is dedicated to these tasks.

While there is no one "best" way to negotiate a customized job, there are some basic steps that can lead to successful employment negotiations. Step one is to begin with a clear knowledge of the jobseeker's vocational interests, strengths, expectations, and support needs. If a job coach is representing the person with a disability, he or she must know the jobseeker's bottom line. Knowing the job seeker will ensure that negotiations move in the right direction from the beginning and that a job of choice for the individual is identified. Compromising on features of a job to satisfy the employer that do not match the interests of the job seeker will not result in a mutually beneficial employment relationship.

Step two is to identify the employer's needs. Successful negotiations also require understanding the business and its operations. Time must be spent building rapport with the employers, before negotiation is attempted for a specific job seeker. Identify the company's needs and suggest possible work solutions that might resolve these needs. One thing to remember is to not assume that what is important for one company will be the same for another. One employer may be

motivated to negotiate a job to save money, while another may have a job task that current employees are not completing. Remember, the end result is a mutually agreed upon job. All sides should leave the negotiation feeling satisfied.

4. Is able to address employer concerns about hiring people with disabilities while maintaining the confidentiality of the job seekers.

They may have preconceived ideas about people with disabilities as well as spoken or unspoken concerns about hiring someone with a disability. In addition, employers may unknowingly ask questions that are unlawful about the person's disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Or, they may be afraid to ask questions. In many communities, employers already know that the job coach works for a "disability" agency simply by knowing the name of the CRP. During initial contacts, the job coach must be able to educate the employer without disclosing information that is confidential.

Strategy: Common employer concerns may include some of the following.

- If I hire a person with a disability, will my liability insurance increase?
- Will hiring a person with a disability cost me money?
- Am I liable if something happens to the job coach when he or she is in my business?
- Will I be sued if I have to fire the person?

Answers to these questions should be discussed, and a policy or standard answers developed that job coaches can use. Examples of how hiring an individual has been beneficial to employers in the community could be gathered and shared with potential businesses. Confirm with the employers and their workers with disabilities that information can be shared regarding their success stories. Focus on how accommodations and supports resulted in worker independence and employer benefits rather than on the specific disabilities of the workers.

Prior to job development, the job coach must talk with the job seekers to decide what, how much, and when to disclose a disability to an employer. Discuss with the individual and his/her family if needed what they want disclosed to the employer. Remember that details about a specific person's disability cannot be disclosed without the individual's consent. Generic answers to questions about disabilities may be OK if specific individuals are not discussed. However, any discussion should be phrased in the terms of providing qualified applicants to the business. This could include how simple accommodations and supports will assist the person in completing the essential job functions that are being negotiated with the employer. Discussing disclosure with the job seeker in advance and always doing so in a way that accentuates the positive is key. Planning to address these issues with business in advance and actually bringing them up during discussion will preclude employers from having to do so or leave them wondering about such things.

5. Is able to identify a wide variety of workplace supports.

Every person with a disability is unique; every job site is different. There is no one type of workplace support that will accommodate all individuals or settings. Supports must be customized. Therefore, job coaches must be familiar with a variety of workplace supports and be ready to facilitate the right type and intensity of support to help the new hire become successful.

Strategy: Some examples of on the job supports might include identifying the natural cues and/or adding compensatory memory strategies to assist the person in task completion. Natural cues include recognizing the salient features of work tasks or supplies. For instance, a person who assists with inventory delivery may need to learn that a particular form in his / her inbox means that someone is ordering supplies to be delivered. In this instance, the natural cue is the presence of the form in the inbox. A compensatory strategy for completing this task might be adding "inboxes" for each department in the company if the worker has difficulty figuring out where to deliver the supplies once the order is filled. Or, if the person cannot read, perhaps the business would be willing to implement a form with small photos of the supplies to be ordered. Providing training on the job skills using instructional techniques, adding assistive technology, implementing training to help teach appropriate social skills on the job are other important things to consider.

The goal is to assist the worker in becoming independent of the job coach as quickly as possible. Therefore, it is critical for job coaches to learn how to recognize and facilitate natural / existing supports in a workplace. Often the success of the new hire will be related to the supports provided by other workers. This might be as simple as observing when coworkers take their breaks and pass through the individual's work area. A coworker might be asked if he/she could provide support or feedback to the worker with a disability during that time period. In other words, facilitating the support from coworkers might be necessary initially but will occur naturally as the coworkers get to know the new worker with a disability.

6. Uses data collection techniques to document effectiveness of workplace supports and to guide fading from the job site.

Decisions about the effectiveness of on the work supports and the employee's progress on the job should not be based on guesswork. It should be based on sound data collection procedures and interpretation of the data presented. Just as job coaches need to be familiar with a variety of workplace, they should also know how to collect and analyze data. This information can then be used to guide instruction and develop a schedule to fade the job coach's presence from the job site.

Strategy: Again, every person is unique. Additionally, every job and workplace is different. Thus, training strategies will vary and hence the appropriate data collection techniques. At a bare minimum, job coaches should be familiar with how to design a task analysis and use it to collect data related to productivity.

Fading must begin the moment the job coach sets foot in the business. Even if this means walking away from the worker for as little as five minutes the first day on the job. Data collection can show the job coach where the worker is performing independently and does not need assistance as mentioned, even on the first day of employment.

7. Provides proactive follow along services.

One of the unique features of supported employment is the ongoing service. As long as the person is employed, follow-up services are provided to monitor work performance and job satisfaction from both the worker and employer's perspectives. This information is used to determine the need for additional supports. Some examples on-going job coach support include assisting the worker to perform new job duties, relearning skills previously learned but being performed incorrectly or poorly, as well as problem-solving issues that occur outside of work, which, if left unattended, could lead to difficulties and possibility job separation.

Strategy: The nature and amount of long-term support needed varies from person to person. Additionally, the type and intensity of support necessary will change over time. Thus, job coaches must become skilled at making observations, collecting data, and asking the "right questions" to predict and identify support needed and provide or facilitate the service. Maintaining ongoing and regular contact with the worker and employer is vital to job retention. This feature of supported employment is one of the benefits that may encourage business to hire a worker with disabilities and use supported employment services.

Summary Key Points

- Functional community-based assessments, instead of testing or simulations should be used to determine the job seeker's skills, interests, learning style, social skills, and support needs. This information helps customize desirable and suitable work options.

- Employers are customers too. As such, job coaches must understand how the service benefits business and be prepared to share this when meeting with employers to discuss job opportunities.

- Some job seekers cannot qualify for existing jobs. Job coaches must encourage business to consider customizing existing job descriptions specifically for a job seeker with disabilities.

- The job coach provides or facilitates both on and off the job supports to help increase the odds that the individual with a disability becomes successful at work.

- Performance data is collected and analyzed to assist the job coach with making decisions about the effectiveness of work place supports. As needed, supports are modified or new ones are developed.

- Long term ongoing support is available throughout the worker's employment. The job coach finds ways to anticipate potential supports and provides or facilitates additional support as indicated.

References

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Additional Online Resources:

APSE The Network on Employment: http://www.apse.org/

VCU CRP-RCEP: http://www.crp-rcep.org

VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports and Job Retention: http://www.worksupport.com

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