

# Employment Support as Knowledge Creation\*

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the US labor force includes 70% of working aged people with no disability and 22% of working aged people with disabilities (BLS, December, 2009). To make the most of the opportunities that exist in this gap, employment services must produce adequate flows of knowledge to move people with disabilities from labor force exclusion to inclusion. Unfortunately, there are signs that the effort to support integrated employment for the portion of this gap formed by people with developmental disabilities is stalling.\*\* As part of a strategy to restore lift, we focus on the subgroup of people with developmental disabilities who require individually negotiated employment conditions, identify some practices for creating practical knowledge, and illustrate their application in one element of assisting people into customized employment, the *Discovery* process (Callahan & Condon, 2007).

From the perspective of knowledge creation, every person who succeeds at a job does so by participating in relationships that produce sufficient practical knowledge to adequately answer four questions:

- Can I work?
- What kind of job interests me?
- How can I get that job?
- How can I succeed in that job?

These are not trivial questions for anyone. Success depends on the level of pertinent intelligence generated in the process of answering these questions, and most Americans will face them repeatedly in an economic environment that shifts continually and fundamentally as the return on assets steadily decreases for US businesses, competitive intensity outstrips US labor productivity, the rate at which US businesses topple from global leadership increases, and a rapidly developing digital infrastructure changes the requirements for success (Hagel, Seely Brown, and Davison, 2009).

Finding good answers to these questions is mostly a matter of practical knowledge rather than knowledge about the topic of finding and succeeding at a job. Substantial numbers of job seekers invest in advice and support, as the success of 38 editions of *What color is your parachute?* (Bolles, 2018) attests. Those who put their money down on Bolles' book and read it without actively engaging its many useful exercises will have a larger stock of good ideas, many supported by evidence, but

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\*\* Most recent data from [statedata.info](http://statedata.info) (accessed May 2018) confirms the stall: the for people with ID/DD receiving services the US average for integrated employment is 19%; New York State is at 13%.

they will not benefit from a stronger flow of practical knowledge until they commit themselves to the risks of active exploration that builds on and extends their network of relationships.

### **The Supported Employment Stall**

A generation of development, policy, technology, improved delivery mechanisms, and demonstrations of significant progress has not yet provided enough lift to assure all people with developmental disabilities a good chance at a real job, and there are troubling signs that the integrated work enterprise is stalling. Improving access to integrated employment has been a priority in US developmental disabilities policy since 1984 (Bellamy & Melia, 1991). The instructional and task design power necessary to give people access to competent performance on complex tasks has been growing since the early 1970's (Gold, 1980). Provider organizations began to implement effective strategies for closing congregate day services and moving most people into employment in the early 1980's (Murphy & Rogan, 1995). More and better options for organizing, funding, and delivering employment services have emerged (see for example, Wehman, Inge, Revell, & Brooke, 2006; Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007). There are well-documented examples of people with substantial impairments enjoying the benefits of good work over many years of fluctuating labor market conditions (Brown, Shiraga, & Kessler, 2006). With strong, capable and consistent leadership (Hall, Butterworth,, Winsor, Gilmore & Metzel, 2007), several states and a number of localities have shown significant growth in the proportion of people in developmental disabilities system sponsored day services who are inclusively employed: by 2004 three states supported about 50% of people funded by the developmental disabilities system in integrated employment (Winsor & Butterworth, 2008).

Unfortunately, these achievements have not generalized. In 2004, the US developmental disabilities system supported 22% of funded participants in integrated employment –and 5 states supported 5% or fewer people; the proportion of people supported in integrated employment in the US dropped from a high of 24 % in 2001; though a smaller proportion of people were served in facility based programs, facility based programs consumed 57% of funding, compared with 12% for integrated employment and 31 % for community-based non-work services, which have grown substantially and serve about 22% of people receiving day services (Winsor & Butterworth, 2008).

There are a number of common explanations for this stall: unfavorable labor market conditions; lack of sufficient public investment; weak leadership; provider entrenchment; inadequate management and measurement systems; misaligned incentives for providers; competing family and guardian priorities; benefits traps; unemployment as a choice of people with developmental disabilities; and hitting the limit of the employability of people with developmental disabilities given employer requirements.

None of these explanations are frivolous –though some of them unhelpfully belittle people with disabilities, family members, employers, and service providers– but they are self-defeating if they lead people to adopt a posture of resignation and set current average system performance as the standard of adequacy. A more interesting course opens when each of these factors in extending the boundaries of the labor force become a focus for knowledge creation. It is practical knowledge, produced with people with developmental disabilities and their networks, that provides lift.

### **Creating Practical Knowledge in Customized Employment**

Collaboration with the people with disabilities who present the greatest complexities to finding and succeeding at community employment generates useful knowledge that provides the best chance of dealing with the constraints that can trap people in segregation. It is by accompanying people across the edge defined by their exclusion that employment service providers can learn most. Accordingly, we focus here on creating actionable knowledge with people who require the negotiation of personalized conditions throughout the process of getting and succeeding on a job, an outcome labeled *Customized Employment* by the US Department of Labor (Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007).

Assisting a person with a disability to move from a history of expected exclusion into employment calls for both insight and risk taking. What excluded people with disabilities need is personalized, practical knowledge that informs and encourages what they do with their allies, their employers, their co-workers, and their supporters. Some people with developmental disabilities will generate most or all of the knowledge they need by collaborating within their own social networks, perhaps drawing on membership in an advocacy or support group, the Internet, or the services of a generic Job Center. Others will need more intensive and personalized assistance. The more remote the prospect of employment seems to a person, the more skillful the knowledge development process must be and the more likely a successful search will include capable facilitation. (Box 1 describes the array of capacities that offer the most people with disabilities the best chance at integrated employment.)

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**Box 1: The Capacities of an effective employment system**

An effective employment system offers assistance at varying levels of intensity and duration for each stage of the process of becoming and staying successfully employed.

|  | Natural Support +<br>Reasonable Accommodation<br>+ Technology | Support to Ordinary<br>Processes | Negotiation of<br>Personalized Conditions |
|--|---|----------------------------------|---|
| Decide to work   |   |                                  |   |
| Identify focus: job or<br>interests, conditions<br>and contributions |   |                                  |   |
| Get the job  |   |                                  |   |
| Succeed on the job   |   |                                  |   |

**Natural support plus reasonable accommodation and assistive technology** refers to what is straightforwardly available in the unique interaction of each person who has access to good assistive technology and their allies with the capacities that generic employment services offer in finding a job and the capacities that the person's workplace can deploy to offer a good chance of success on the job. The numbers of people able to move into employment with this level of assistance are likely to increase as people and their families expect employment, learn such strategies as searching for jobs through their social networks, and secure access to effective assistive technology; and as more employers gain experience with reasonable accommodation.

**Support to ordinary processes** refers to skilled assistance that increases the capacity of typical job search and workplace processes to lead to success on the job. Skilled and individualized benefits counseling, problem solving around potential changes in routines (such as work schedules or transportation), assistance with job search, adapting or adding equipment, consulting on systematic instruction or adaptation of the tasks included in a person's job description, arranging personal assistance, or problem solving and competence building around job orientation and supervision issues are examples of such support.

**Negotiation of personalized conditions** occurs when support for ordinary processes is insufficient to identify, get, or succeed at a good job. This includes a discovery process that requires substantial time from someone with a well tuned eye and ear for interest and capacity in people and potential workplaces; the ability to identify valuable unmet need and negotiate with employers the terms on which a person can fill that need; and the capacity to discover and implement what it takes in the way of adaptation, technology, instruction, and problem solving for a person to deliver value to the employer in a way that is dignified and satisfying.

This array defines a repertoire, not types of service. The rule for each stage is: consistent with a judgment about what will lead to long term success on the job, move only as far to the right of each row as necessary and move back to the left as soon as possible. The rule for the whole is: don't assume that either a capacity or a need for support in one cell determines the amount of support needed in other cells.

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The employment environment changes continually and so do possibilities for people with disabilities. Stocks of knowledge need continual updating and the taken-for-granted assumptions that made sense in the last century don't support the kind of change needed to significantly increase the numbers of people with developmental disabilities in integrated employment in this century. A capable employment system enables continual innovation by purposely generating knowledge flows at three levels: whole system management, provider organization, and individual practice. Those responsible for managing the whole employment service system shape their investment, program design, and management decisions with a continually updated account of what is working to move excluded people into good jobs. As a community of practice, employment service workers improve the practices that build intelligence in their relationships with people with disabilities and others who make a difference to successful employment. This involves shared problem solving, exchanging and refining strategies and techniques, and exploring the questions that arise in their work (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). In their daily relationships, employment service practitioners build collaborations that provide strong contexts in which to apply, adapt and invent support strategies and technologies.

The conditions for generating practical knowledge have themselves become the focus of explicit learning, (for an exemplar, see Nonaka, Toyama & Hirata, 2008). Practical knowledge grows and performance accelerates when people have sufficient working trust to intentionally immerse themselves in questions with meaningful but uncertain answers; reach outside usual boundaries to engage people and join groups with diverse perspectives and capacities; test familiar frames by being curious, critical, and playful; and engage in productive inquiry by getting stuck in worthwhile problems and together figuring a way through (Nonaka, Toyama & Hirata, 2008; Senge, Seely Brown, & Rheingold, 2008).

The path to useful knowledge in employment services runs through participation in the construction of new social realities: work environments that benefit from the contributions of previously excluded people. Much useful knowledge is tacit, enacted in the way the work is done at its best. A key purpose of making explicit what is known in action is to test, improve, and disseminate effective practices and policies to improve the employment system as a whole.

### **Facilitated *Discovery* As Knowledge Creation**

*Discovery* (Callahan, Shumpert, & Condon, 2009) is a set of practices that initiate a flow of relevant knowledge for people making purposeful changes in their lives. These practices have been tested and refined since 1986, mostly in the context of a successful process for supporting people with substantial disabilities to establish themselves in integrated employment, often in customized jobs. Starting with the recognition that many individuals with work complexities as a result of disability were being excluded from employment at the outset by comparative evaluation practices, it became necessary to establish an alternative. Starting in the late 1980's a series of national employment projects embraced discovery (or the *vocational*

*profile strategy* as it was then called) to create the foundation of information necessary for successful work in the community. (McLoughlin, Garner & Callahan, 1987; Callahan, 1991, Callahan & Garner, 1997.) Drawing on its roots in qualitative research methods (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), *Discovery* for employment proceeds in two steps. First construct as full an answer as possible to the question “Who is this person?” Then translate this understanding of the person into possibilities relevant to employment by attending closely and identifying interests, potential contributions, and conditions for the person’s success. The translation informs the answer to the first question on the path to integrated employment: “Can I work and do I choose to look for a good job?” If the person decides to seek work, the next stage is to begin a job search by creating a *Profile*. People can self-guide *Discovery*, or share their inquiry with a peer group, or use the assistance of a skilled facilitator. We focus here on facilitated *Discovery* because it exemplifies important conditions for knowledge creation that contrast in important ways with common practices in employment services. The process of *Discovery* is outlined in Box 2.

**Box 2: The Process of Discovery**

| Process step   | Context   |
|--|---|
| 1. Explain the process to the person and allies & supporters, as appropriate.                | Service location, person’s home or community meeting space  |
| 2. Meet with the person in places where they are at their best                               | Home, neighborhood, school, community   |
| 3. Converse with and interview person, allies & supporters.                                  | Work, home or community location for each person interviewed  |
| 4. Observe the person in activities of everyday life.  | Varied locations at home, in neighborhood, community, service agency, school, etc.  |
| 5. Participate with the person in familiar & novel activities.                               | Specific, targeted activities that reflect both the most familiar and competent activities of the person as well as well-matched novel ones |
| 6. Reviewing all materials that describe the person’s life, sorting for positive information | Permanent files, scrap books, memorabilia, awards, crafts, art  |
| 7. Compile all materials into a descriptive Profile format                                   | Joint process between facilitator staff, individual, family, friends and other allies   |

The facilitator approaches the person with the conviction that an integrated job is within any person’s reach even when the way there is not clear, and facilitated *Discovery* is about thinking divergently to build up a working sense of possibilities and create relationships that will support action. So *Discovery* suspends questions about whether the person will decide to work and what sort of work would fit the person best. Instead, *Discovery* invites the person and those who know the person to immerse themselves with the facilitator in exploring the open ended question, “Who is this person?” in a variety of ways and from different perspectives. The only respectful question that is out of bounds at this stage is the most obvious one in a

process aimed at employment, namely, “What job do you want to do?” In part, people are enjoined from this question because pursuing it shifts attention away from fully exploring who the person is now, prematurely converges on a particular job title, and narrows attention to a debate about predictions of employment feasibility. Such debates about predictions very seldom favor the person’s prospects, often sap confidence that the person can work at all, and frequently raise anxieties about risk and loss that shut down the desire to explore. Done well, this step builds desire to negotiate suitable work and informs the rest of the process of achieving success in an integrated job.

The knowledge that moves an excluded person into integrated work is particular and situated. It is produced in a respectful relationship through a variety of practices that purposefully combine conversation and spending time doing things together with more structured interviews and observation. The person and those who know the person in different ways are invited to be collaborating experts in formulating what is unique about this person, what capacities this person has, and what opportunities this person might find meaningful. The process begins in a setting where the person feels most safe and comfortable, often their family home. As working trust grows, people try new things together to find out what stretching their comfort zone a bit reveals. *Discovery* begins by moving the facilitator across service system boundaries and into the person’s world and then invites the person and those who know the person to consider the new possibilities that lie on the other side of the boundary that has kept the person away from opportunities for success in community settings. In constructing and talking about possibilities, participants in *Discovery* practice the knowledge creation disciplines of openness, close attention, and translation from what is tacit in current contexts to what could be meaningful in the context of work.

*Discovery* makes what is tacit in the person’s history and everyday life explicit in the context of identifying capacities that an employer could value, interests that could make work meaningful and the necessary conditions that could make work successful. Success depends on close attention and skill in interpreting across contexts. Examples of translation include these: “Andy removes a CD from its case, opens the CD drawer, inserts the CD, closes the drawer, pushes “Play”, and adjusts the volume. He could be taught to copy training CD’s for the HR department of a large company.” (Potential contribution.) “James owns the TV remote and watches cop shows for hours every night. He might like to work in some aspect of law enforcement.” (Likely interest.) “Trang was asked to join a group of other students in preparing spaghetti for a high school fund raiser. She worked for one hour. The teacher says Trang will not help in the special ed classroom kitchen. Trang will probably benefit more from peer supports for functional activities in a natural setting than activities offered solely by a teacher in an instructional setting.” (Probable condition.)

Translation is a practice of consciously shifting the frames people use to make sense of experience and thereby opening new possibilities for action. This mat-

ters especially when the person is perceived as so impaired as to make integrated work impossible or a local labor market is perceived as having no slack whatsoever for negotiating employment roles and conditions. One of the arts of facilitation is encouraging a shift from a deficiency-scarcity frame that justifies exclusion to a capacity-assets frame that encourages the entrepreneurial activity of creating new ways to add value in the workplace. The possibilities disclosed by such reframing are not predictions or prescriptions, they are openings to new ways to see a person in relation to work and invitations to seek further knowledge in a better defined direction of search. Andy may never copy a CD at work, but frozen perceptions of him as unable to work start to melt when he is imagined as learning to do an economically valuable task which is grounded in what he can already do. Attending to the practical implications of Trang's unexpected productivity as part of a team of peers guides selection of work environments and emphasizes the importance of assuring her membership in a supportive team of co-workers.

As people participate in *Discovery* they engage in practices that create useful knowledge. They invest working trust in people considering the possibilities revealed by careful regard for everyday life; they immerse themselves together in meaningful, open questions; they cross boundaries to explore; they test and switch frames to reveal very specific possibilities that will guide and motivate the next steps in the employment process. By working together, they begin to align a network of people whose actions will feed a flow of practical knowledge around integrated employment for this particular person.

### **Knowledge Creation Versus Prediction and Prescription**

*Discovery* contrasts with employment strategies that gather experienced professionals to assess the person's capacity for work, guide the person to make a vocational plan, develop a job and match the person to it, and provide training and coaching to allow the person to satisfy job requirements. These tasks can be done in more and less effective and respectful ways. People can be tested with unfamiliar work samples in unfamiliar service contexts or thoughtfully interviewed about their skills, preferences, and needs for support. Assessments can be aimed at culling those who threaten an agency's success rate or revealing a person's strengths and weaknesses. Plans can be made as a professionally defined and guided exercise in setting goals to remediate deficiencies revealed by professional assessment or as a conversation centered on discovering a person's idea of their dream job. People can be matched to an inventory of already identified jobs with employers familiar to the professionals or benefit from a search conducted to meet their preferences as much as it is realistic to do so given employer requirements. Training and coaching can be little more than heightened supervision and prompting or skillful and systematic instruction that increases co-worker's skill and desire to help.

Within this pattern of service, more respectful approaches are preferable and effective, in part because they have a greater potential to produce practical knowledge.

However, even the best of these approaches require people and their allies to meet a threshold for entry that many will find too high because they are designed to bring motivated people into a professionally defined process that will push them into employment. Those whose attention is framed by a deficiency perspective on themselves or their potential employers will be trapped in their own prediction that work is impossible for them (or those whose interests they are empowered to protect). Those who lack the experience of using and extending their social networks to create ways through barriers will be daunted by their estimate of the losses and difficulties presented by going to work. Those who distrust or resent professionals defining their life chances won't have the relationships necessary to collaborative exploration and use of expertise. Those who lack a grounded appreciation of their own capacities and sources of meaning will have over-specific and often misleading answers to the question of what job they prefer.

For at least the segment of people with developmental disabilities who are most uncertain that work is possible and desirable for them, it makes more sense to design a process with a much higher investment in supporting the person, the person's allies, and the person's potential employers to experience themselves as participants in a process of generating relevant knowledge. As they are joined by a facilitator who models openness, respectfully joins them in discovering the employment possibilities implicit in their everyday experience, and encourages recruitment of others in the exploration, they experience pulling in and organizing the resources they need to make their way into integrated employment. They can build trust, try on new frames for making sense of their experience, strengthen their networks, build skill and confidence in problem solving, and extend the field of opportunities they see as meaningful. Putting people at the center of a process of that pulls them into integrated employment has a better chance of supporting those alienated from the possibility of work than trying to fit them into a process designed to push them to a job. Strategies that support people and their allies to pull in resources and organize opportunities by negotiation allow a greater variety of work arrangements to emerge than strategies that reduce professional uncertainty with predefined process and outcomes. (For more on the distinction between mobilizing resources by push versus pull, see Hagel & Seely Brown, 2008).

Having clear sight of possibilities and the resolve to find and succeed at a good job is a necessary first step, but the forces of exclusion still shape a hard path. People and their allies will have ample opportunities for productive inquiry, a name for getting stuck together and figuring out a way to keep moving forward. Subsequent steps in the competitive employment process build on *Discovery* to continue the creation of practical knowledge. Conditions never stop changing so the knowledge flow can be refreshed as long as people continue to notice relevant changes and find ways to make the best of them.

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