

Analysis of the Types of Natural Supports Utilized During Job Placement and Development

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*reprinted with permission: The Journal of Rehabilitation, April-June 1997 (v63 i2) p. 43.

Abstract: The author examines the results of a survey on job placement. Survey information regarding levels of job satisfaction, vocational services provided, and work environments are discussed. This study analyzes placements of individuals with severe disabilities in integrated work settings and describes the support provided through accommodations designed to empower consumers, employers, and co-workers with responsibility typically assigned to job coaches. A comprehensive, field-generated definition was utilized to categorize natural supports. Results showed that the supported employment professionals implemented primarily natural supports, which excluded the assistance of a job coach and represented a shift to supports associated with the workplace. These professionals identified planning meetings as the "key" to identifying the needs of individuals with disabilities as well as natural supports in the workplace. Employers reported that they adjusted or modified the supports implemented by the supported employment professionals and initiated the design of additional, new supports.

In order to achieve successful community employment for workers with severe disabilities, supports independent of agency personnel (i.e., supports found naturally or typically in the workplace) must be implemented (Callahan, 1992; Fabian & Luecking, 1991; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988). Many individuals with severe disabilities may need training and follow-along services for extended periods of time, possibly for the duration of employment. Consequently, in order to transfer all or part of the responsibility for support from professional service providers, it is important to implement natural supports to provide consistent ongoing training and follow-along services.

The role of the supported employment specialist is to match an individual to a meaningful job in the community by assessing his/her characteristics and needs in relation to job requisites and determining the individual's strengths, skills, abilities, support needs, and preferences (Trach, 1990). When the support needs of an individual with significant disabilities are addressed as part of the work site, reliance on a job coach should be diminished or eliminated. Support models, such as natural supports, "developed from a close examination of natural work settings are likely to avoid many of the difficulties that constrain with the job coach model" (Nisbet & Hagner, 1988, p. 261). Supported employment efforts should begin with an examination of the social interactions and supports that are commonplace in natural work environments, and then should build upon and augment these natural processes and interactions within the work site (Hanley-Maxwell & Millington, 1992; Rogan, Hagner, & Murphy, 1993).

Early employment models, which later served as the conceptual framework for supported

employment, presented a technology for employing persons in community jobs focused on strategies (Trach, 1990). From the beginning of services identified as supported employment, the field has developed the notion of job coach in conjunction with or in parallel to, the provision of service. The name has undergone some changes (e.g., employment training specialist) while becoming nearly synonymous with the services provided (i.e., supported employment). This study investigates those services from a categorical perspective of those types of supports that most often substitute the action for the person. In other words, job coaches need not deliver all services; in fact, in most cases the job coach is not the appropriate source of support. The basic premise of this research is that if a job coach provides all the services, then for an employee to be independent, 100% of the support must be faded or transferred. This investigation describes a group of placements that utilized a categorical approach to the provision of support that focused on the delivery of service by any means other than a traditional job coach approach as described by Wehman, Sale, & Parent (1992).

SPANS

"A Competency-Based Training Program to Promote, Implement, and Evaluate a Systematic Plan for Achieving Natural Supports (SPANS)" targets resources and individuals to assist with planning employment, determining support needs, and implementing natural supports for individuals with disabilities (Trach & Shelden, 1993). The training program promotes a systematic process for determining and implementing natural supports for these individuals, targeting a higher level of integration, acceptance, and satisfaction for them. The SPANS model contains an operational definition of natural supports with six components: consumer-driven planning, ecological assessment of individual needs, environmental assessment of natural supports, identification of natural supports in multiple environments, matching natural supports to individual needs, and development of individual natural supports plans. The SPANS Training Project enhances the capacity of the participants to develop, implement, and evaluate effective, systematic models of natural supports.

Natural Supports Definition

The operational definition of natural supports developed and used by participants states that natural supports are "human or technical resources that are available or can be developed in a setting to facilitate integration, acceptance, and satisfaction, and to promote the goals and interests of all individuals in the setting." Natural supports were further defined as organizational supports, physical supports, social supports, training supports, service supports, and community supports (Trach & Shelden, 1993).

This study investigates the frequency with which various types of supports were implemented, the duration of use and stability of those supports, and the variety of employment settings accessed. The following questions were addressed:

1. Which type or category of support is most frequently implemented by program participants?
2. Do program participants recognize a relationship between the type of employment and the types of supports most frequently utilized?

3. Have supports been adjusted or modified since the consumer began employment?
4. Have employers initiated modifications of existing supports?
5. Have employers initiated design or implementation of additional supports?

Method

Participants

The study included of 19 participants in an intensive training program that focused on developing natural supports; they included state rehabilitation counselors, adult agency program coordinators for employment and training services, and school personnel involved in transitional, competitive, and supported employment. Participants demonstrated their training in three- to six-month externships in which they were to place in supported employment a person with a severe disability from sheltered employment or a school program. There were five two-person teams, one three-person team, and six individuals.

Teams implemented a total of 14 projects. The process was documented, and the teams reported regularly on the progress of their demonstration. Consultation consisted of phone contacts and site visits.

Procedure

The study was conducted in two phases within the context of the supports delineated in Table 1. First, document review of participant final reports were utilized to determine the type and frequency of natural supports.

Second, a phone survey was conducted (a) to determine agreement of SPANS program participants and researchers concerning the types and frequency of supports utilized, (b) to assess the duration and stability of supports, and (c) to describe the type of employment. In addition, each support utilized by program participants was evaluated to determine if it was adjusted or initiated by the employer. Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with each program participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1986); these interviews focused on (a) deciding which supports to implement, (b) the relationship between type of employment and types of supports, (c) the modifications of existing supports initiated by employers, and (d) employer-initiated design or implementation of additional, new supports. Frequency counts of the various supports and relative frequency of natural supports implemented were obtained from the data collected from the final reports, while phone interviews with the program participants provided trend information and confirmed the final report data. Final reports provided descriptions of the employment process and related statistics.

Table 1

SPANS Model of Natural Supports

Support	Definition
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Organizational	Preparing and organizing activities in the setting, including but not limited to scheduling, order of tasks, and location of materials (e.g., flextime, prioritized schedule, centralizing supplies).
Physical	Design and function of physical objects and equipment in a setting, including technical and nontechnical supports (e.g., robotics, ramps).
Social	Interacting with nondisabled individuals in an environment (e.g., carpools, lunch and break partners).
Training	Extending personal competence and skill through direct training and instruction (e.g., self-management and mentor programs, coaching).
Service	Accessing professional and nonprofessional disability-related services (e.g., PASS program, volunteers through ILC).
Community	Accessing community agencies and services that are available to all individuals (e.g., public transportation, YMCA/YWCA programs).

[Graphic omitted]**Results**

Document Review

The review of the 15 final reports identified a total of 88 natural supports implemented by the 19 program participants in their externships. Reliability was calculated as 90% agreement. Of the 88 natural supports identified, 21.6% (n=19) of the natural supports were considered training supports, 20.5% (n=18) were social, 19.3% (n=17) were physical, 19.3% (n=17) were service supports, 13.6% (n=12) were organizational, and 5.7% (n=5) were community supports. These results indicate that social and physical supports were frequently utilized, whereas only one of every 11 supports reported (9.1%) was provided in the traditional fashion by a job coach.

Further analysis of training and social supports provided additional information (see Table 2). Of the total of 19 training supports, 57.9% (n=11) were implemented by someone other than a job coach and 42.1% (n=8) were implemented by job coaches. Furthermore, two of the eight job-coach supports initially required full-time job coaches, which were then modified to follow-along status. The second most frequent support implemented was social support. Of the 18 social supports utilized, supervisors or coworkers were utilized in 61.2% (n=11), family members assisted with support in 27.7% (n=5), and community individuals were utilized in 11.1% (n=2). Job coaches were not involved in any of the social, physical, organizational, and community supports. These supports constituted 59.1% of the total of identified natural supports. Altogether, 52 natural supports were implemented without the assistance of a job coach.

Table 2

Relative Frequency of Training and Social Supports by Category of Provider Support Provider
Training Supports (N=19)

	n	%
Job Coach	8	42.1
Consumer	6	31.6
Supervisor/Co-Worker	4	21.0
Parent/Family Member	1	5.3
Community Individual	0	-

Support Provider Social Supports (N= 18)

	n	%
Job Coach	0	-
Consumer	0	-
Supervisor/Co-Worker	11	61.2
Parent/Family Member	5	27.7
Community Individual	2	11.1

Phone Survey

Seventeen of the 19 program participants participated in phone interviews. Participant responses are described below.

Question 1: Tell me how you decide which support to implement. Fourteen of the participants responded that they used the planning meeting with key stakeholders to determine what support needs existed and what support resources should be implemented for the individual. This strategy and format were introduced at the SPANS Training Program. This process provides opportunities for the consumer, parents, previous job coaches, teacher, vocational counselor, employer, personal care attendant, and other persons to discuss issues and concerns related to the needs and supports of the consumer, and potential solutions for consumer needs. Six participants reported that the primary means for determining the consumers' supports was to ask the consumers what they needed in order to be successful on the job.

Five of the participants responded that it was crucial to include the employer in the planning process so as to identify the job and duties that were going to be assigned to the consumer. Potentially, the employer may assist by providing different ways to do the tasks and to suggest adaptations that may make the job easier.

[Graphic omitted]**Question 2:** What is the relationship between type of employment and types of support? Four participants reported a direct relationship between type of employment and type of support. One participant who had placed a consumer in food service believed that social supports were most frequently utilized. He attributed this observation to the team approach utilized at most restaurants. Another participant observed a relationship between the data entry and mail delivery job and type of supports. In this instance, a consumer with a physical disability was offered this job with specific supports implemented to assist directly in performing job duties. In another instance, a consumer who traveled within the community was provided social supports in various locations by individuals with those environments. In contrast, a consumer who worked independently of co-workers was provided physical supports.

Seven program participants reported a relationship between the type of employment and the needs of the consumer. These participants stated that they matched their consumer's needs with specific supports that were available and acceptable within that type of employment environment. They also reported that some employment sites were more accommodating than others.

The twelve consumers in this study were employed through the training program externships. Five placements were in maintenance, four placements were in restaurants, two clerical placements were in a library and in data entry and mail delivery, and one factory placement performed assembly-line work. Two of the consumers had not yet found community employment. Frequency and relative frequency of natural supports utilized by types of employment are shown in Table 3 (page 46).

Table 3

Frequency and Relative Frequency of Natural Supports Utilized by Types of Employment

Support	Maintenance (5)(*)		Food Service (4)	
	n	%	n	%
Training	7	15	6	30
Social	8	17	6	30
Physical	10	22	1	5
Service	12	26	1	5
Organizational	7	15	5	25
Community	2	4	1	5
TOTAL	46	100	20	100

Support	Clerical (2)		Factory (1)	
	n	%	n	%
Training	1	8	5	50
Social	4	33	0	0
Physical	5	42	1	10
Service	1	8	3	30
Organizational	0	0	0	0
Community	1	8	1	10
TOTAL	12	100	10	100

(*) The number in parentheses indicates the number of jobs in each job category.

The data indicate that the five consumers who worked in maintenance utilized primarily service and physical supports. These consumers received many service supports outside of work, such as a case manager, adult family home provider, job center, an educational video, a PASS (Plan for Achieving Self Support), and an afternoon day program. The physical supports utilized by the consumers included checklists, a schedule of activities, a tape recorder, a map, a cart, pliers, rubber gloves, and a water bottle.

The supports used most frequently in food service jobs were training and social. The training supports included co-worker training and job coach training as well as co-workers' prompting and encouragement of the consumers.

Training supports also targeted consumers learning to control emotions, to display appropriate behavior and hygiene, and to maintain uniforms. There were a wide range of social supports implemented as part of the team effort emphasized in these settings. Co-worker support occurred in the form of encouragement, instruction, and feedback.

Physical supports were highest in the two clerical positions. These consumers had significant disabilities, with physical support needed to access the computer and deliver the mail. Other physical accommodations included an electric wheelchair, a grasping tool, and a communication board. Social supports consisted of co-worker assistance and praise, and family assistance with transportation. In contrast, the consumer in the factory position utilized the most training supports, such as self-monitoring strategies, listening to his supervisor, and changing his work performance when asked.

[Graphic omitted]

Question 3: How have the supports that you implemented been adjusted or modified since your consumer began employment? Four participants stated that their formal supports had decreased in terms of job-coaching service hours. Furthermore, many of the services the job coach initially provided were transferred to the supervisors or co-workers, and more responsibility was given to the consumer. Participants suggested that this decrease in "formal supports" appeared to be associated with the planning process described previously. Therefore, as a result of planning done before the consumer actually got the job, and throughout the job, many of the formal supports decreased. Consequently, individuals within the work site assisted with determining the support needs and resources, which ultimately resulted in the fading of the job coach and transfer of the provision of the support to the site. In fact, a new role of employment consultant was defined by some participants to assist with the development of natural supports within the workplace.

Six program participants reported providing follow-up services through occasional visits to the workplace. The participants gave suggestions when questions or problems were posed and decreased their services. The consumer then assumed the responsibility of utilizing the supports that were implemented.

There was a reported difference between how the job coaches operated before and after the SPANS Training Program. Consequently, job coaches were now concentrating on determining the consumer's needs and identifying which supports within the environment can be implemented to assist the consumer. They also worked to determine social supports within the workplace. The new role of the employment consultant was to help the employer to assist the consumer with successfully performing his/her job duties and functioning independently.

Question 4: How have the employers where your consumer is placed initiated modifications of the existing supports that you implemented? Seven of the program participants stated that the employers/supervisors and co-workers took the initiative in working more directly with the consumers. They stated that social supports were used because of the job coach responsibilities were shifted to other individuals within the work environment. Three instances were reported in which co-workers were providing training when the consumer was learning new tasks. They

believed that as co-workers felt more comfortable with the consumers over time, they became part of the team effort at the workplace. As the consumer began to perform the job independently, training was further decreased by the supervisors and co-workers, and minimal prompting was necessary. Seven participants reported that the supervisors and employers were responsible for prompting, modeling, reminding, and feedback on performance.

Question 5: How have the employers initiated design or implementation of additional, new supports? Seven participants had several instances where the employer initiated many new supports for the consumer. The employers who did not initiate new design or implementation of supports had consumers who performed the same job throughout. Thus, once the job had been developed, there was no need for additional accommodations.

Two employers initiated a number of additional new supports with consumers who had quite significant physical disabilities. Participants suggested that the need for physical supports may be more recognizable, and employers may have the greater capacity to provide them. For example, if a ramp was installed, a consumer could then easily enter and exit the building independently. For a consumer who entered data, a number of adaptations to the computer were necessary to provide access. Another employer initiated several new supports in the organizational category. This employer purchased new break-room furniture to facilitate participation during break time, and removed casters from the chairs to accommodate a consumer with physical disabilities and visual impairment.

Five participants reported a number of additional new supports implemented by the employers, such as enabling a consumer to develop her own work schedule; developing a routine for the consumers by adding more job duties in different areas of the workplace; and assigning a consumer to several co-workers to give the consumer a variety of opportunities to work with different co-workers.

Finally, one employer continually provided specific instructions, gave the consumer time to complete the specific task, and returned to give immediate feedback to the consumer about his task performance.

Discussion

The results of data analysis and phone interviews with the SPANS program participants described the extent of the utilization of natural supports. Training supports were used most frequently, followed by social supports. None of the 52 social, physical, organization, and community supports, was provided by job coaches. The participants utilized natural supports, re-assigned responsibility for the provision of services for consumers with disabilities, and promoted the fading of the job coach; that is, the provision of services shifted from the job coach to other means of support.

Throughout the phone survey, fourteen of the program participants stated that the planning was the most helpful factor in determining consumers' needs and the required supports. The planning meeting convenes key stakeholders who assisted in determining the consumer's needs on and off the job, identifying supports that might be utilized to assist the consumer, and matching supports to needs. The goal was to implement means of assisting the consumer other than the traditional job coach supports, which in turn enabled the consumer to be more independent of the job coach and better integrated into the employment situation.

Participants reported a direct relationship between the type of employment and types of supports

most frequently utilized, as well as between the specific job and the needs of their consumer. Some program participants indicated that they saw a relationship between the type of employment, the specific job, and the consumer. The participants indicated that there existed a "best match" for their consumers, and the planning process facilitated the negotiation for a supportive environment and the selection of a type of employment and environment that were more accommodating than others, based on co-workers or the nature of the business.

Furthermore, a number of supports were adjusted or modified after the consumer began employment and job-coaching services had decreased or lessened. Many of the supports that the job coach had initially provided had been transferred to individuals within the workplace, such as employers, supervisors, and coworkers. Job coaching decreased and was replaced by additional consultation with the employer rather than one-on-one consumer training. Consequently, employers adjusted or modified supports, and social supports became more prevalent, possibly because coworkers were training and interacting more with the supported employees. The co-workers provided prompting, modeling, feedback, and reminding, and thus became more comfortable with the consumers. In turn, there were organizational changes, which resulted in employers assigning more job duties to consumers. This job enhancement made the consumer a more integral part of the employment setting through additional responsibilities and seemed to indicate an increase in the employer's understanding of and trust in the consumer.

Some employers had initiated the design of additional, new supports. The adaptations to the actual workplace, and modifications to the job and/or materials used for the job seem to be easily recognizable to employers. Employers who assist consumers with physical disabilities provide supports that are physical in nature and can be implemented quite quickly, so that the results are immediately apparent. Therefore, it may be that employers experience success and satisfaction with the supports they have implemented, and thus are more apt to try other supports for the consumers. Comparatively, in terms of consumers with cognitive disabilities, the supports implemented may take a longer period of time to see significant results due to learning patterns. However, when employers have positive experiences with consumers with physical disabilities, they may be more apt to try to work with a different population of individuals with disabilities.

Employer, co-worker, and community roles have been and will continue to be expanded (Baumgart & Askvig, 1992; Curl & Chisholm, 1993; Fleming & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1992; Rhodes, Sandow, Mank, Buckley, & Albin, 1991; Ridgely, 1992). In addition, job coach roles will expand (Rogan, Hagner, & Murphy, 1993; Rusch, 1990; Wehman, Sale, & Parent, 1992). Additional studies concentrating on the type and extent of assistance that employers need to successfully employ consumers with both physical and cognitive disabilities would provide useful information. Generally, new areas of research and training focused on partnerships with business should shift attention from the supported employee to a supportive work environment (Bissonnette, 1994; Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1994).

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