

# RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

## *Customized Employment*

Brown, L., Shiraga, B., & Kessler, K. (2006). The quest for ordinary lives: The integrated post-school vocational functioning of 50 workers with significant disabilities. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 31(2), 93-121.

### **BOTTOM LINE**

In this study, personal and employment histories of 50 individuals with significant disabilities were examined in table format to identify trends in employment and support the validity of integrated work experiences. Personal histories included: exit year of high school, age disability label and residential support. Employment histories included work environment, time at job, work tasks, hours per week, hourly wage, professional support and reasons for changing jobs. The participants' experiences began 15-24 years ago when they entered the services provided by *Community Work Services Inc.* in Madison, Wisconsin.

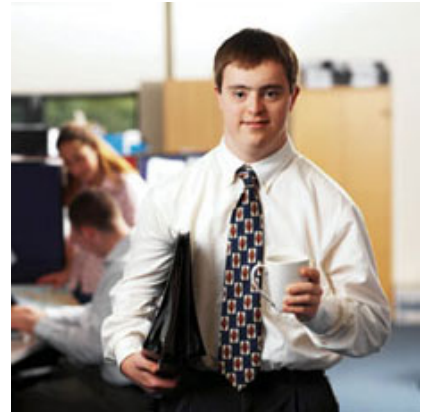
## Beach Center on Disability

Making a Sustainable Difference in Quality of Life



## ACTION STEPS

- It is exceedingly important to provide authentic vocational assessment and instructions to support individuals with disabilities achieve integrated employment.
- Begin by exploring the students' strengths and interests to ensure a proper job match.
- Provide opportunities to learn skills for successful performance in a variety of integrated settings such as lunchrooms, break rooms, parks, busses etc.
- Help students to become proficient at as many skills as possible under natural supervisory conditions to help reduce their reliance on 1 to 1 support.
  - “The clear message to schools is to teach students to participate effectively in the highest possible personnel to student ratios” (p. 120).
  - “The more you cost, the higher are the probabilities that you will be confined to segregated settings, placed on waiting lists and/or confined to home” (p. 120).
- Expose children without disabilities to working with students with disabilities, as these are their future coworkers.
- “Start fading out school and scheduling in experiences in integrated nonschool settings no later than age 14” (as cited in Brown et al., 1983).
- Expose students to as many integrated work settings as early as possible. Research suggests that early real work placement is a strong predictor of long-term employment (Wehman, 2006).
- Incorporate social skill training that can be adapted to the work place (i.e. how to engage in water cooler talk).



Picture from the *Maine Employment Work for Me* website at <http://www.employmentforme.org/>

## KEY FINDINGS

- In 2002, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education “reported that approximately 70% of all persons with disabilities in the United States between the ages of 18 and 64 were unemployed or grossly underemployed” (p. 93).

- In 2004, the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities reported that “90% of the approximately nine million adults in the USA so labeled were unemployed” (p. 93).
- The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) in their dedication to changing the outcomes of their students with significant disabilities, employed *authentic vocational assessments* to guide their progress toward community work services.
  - ◆ Authentic vocational assessment “refers to arranging for an individual with disabilities to participate in real work and related settings and activities and then determining meaningful discrepancies between the expressed repertoire and the actual requirements of minimally acceptable participation” (p. 94).
- The study contains information related to 50 students with significant disabilities that exited high school from 1981-2005.
- The work tasks were modified to meet the needs of the employers but all employees performed real work tasks.
  - ◆ “If a worker with disabilities does not complete a task in accordance with the minimally acceptable standards of an employer, and as a consequence a co-worker without disabilities must be paid to do so, it is considered real work” (p. 115).
- A summary of the results can be found in Figure 1.
- Many of the workers were employed in two or more work environments per day or per week due to variety of tasks available, range of social opportunities, behavioral adaptations and skill level.
- According to the authors, an adaptation “refers to something that is added to, or changed in, the setting that allows a worker with disabilities to perform his or her work in accordance with the minimally acceptable standards of an employer” (p. 115).
- Out of the 18 job terminations: 14 were due to unacceptable social/behavioral actions, 2 were due to poor work quality and 2 were due to excessive absenteeism.
- Out of the 18 layoffs: 6 were due to declines in business, 5 were due to the tasks the employees performed were phased out, 2 of the jobs were assumed by a full-time employee, and 5 were due to insufficient amount of work available.
- “Interestingly, many of the workers who presented social and behavioral challenges worked the most hours per week” (p. 116).
- Professional support refers to support provided by a job coach or the like that would not be provided if the employee did not have a disability.

- ◆ Professional support needed to be flexible, on-going and responsive for the individual to succeed in the working environment.
- ◆ Professional support included:
  - Providing systematic training and instruction
  - Verifying work was completed acceptably and that negotiated routines and schedules were followed
  - Motivating workers
  - Assisting employers/supervisors to set workers up with assigned tasks
  - Monitoring behavioral challenges and following through with agreed upon interventions
  - Facilitating social interactions and communications between coworkers/supervisors
  - Monitoring, evaluating, and improving the effectiveness of individualized adaptations
  - Getting feedback from employers and/or coworkers about worker performance and responding constructively
  - Assisting in restroom and related activities
  - Monitoring medical conditions and dispensing medications
  - Assisting during transitions to and from work sites, lunchrooms, transportation points
  - Responding appropriately to extraordinary situations.
- “Many coworkers described their work environments as being enhanced, their morale improved, and their personal and professional lives more fulfilled because they worked with the persons with disabilities” (p. 118).
  - ◆ There were many cases in which the employee joined their coworkers in outside leisure activities such as birthday parties, barbeques, and recreation.
- There is sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that “with authentic instruction and reasonable long-term and personalized support, individuals with significant disabilities can be engaged successfully and safely in integrated vocational settings over long periods” (p. 119).

**Figure 1.**

Summary of Results	
Category	Average Response of 46 Participants
Age	Mean age = 39.9
Disability Labels	Moderate Cognitive Disability = 40 Severe Cognitive Disability = 9 Mild Cognitive Disability = 1; Down Syndrome = 21 Cerebral Palsy = 7 Autism = 4 Cornelia DeLange Syndrome = 1
Residence and Support (Living Arrangements)	Live with Parents = 10 Live with Sibling = 1 Live with One Other Individual and Support Personnel = 20 Live with One Other Individual and Supported by Support Personnel = 11 Live in Adult Family Homes (Foster Homes for Adults) = 4
Integrated Work Environments – Many Worked in Two or More Environments in a Day/Week	Different Work Environments Total = 150 <u>In 1986</u> Food Service = 20 Office Settings = 22 <u>In 2005</u> Food Service = 6 Office Settings = 47
Years and Months in Job	Ranged from 2 Months to 27 Years
Work Tasks	All completed <i>real work</i> tasks. Examples – Cleaning, Assembling, Labeling Filing etc.
Hours Per Week	Average = a 20.15 Hours Per Week
Hourly Wage	Average = \$5.76 (minimum wage = \$5.70)
Professional Support	Support Arrangements Included : 1 to 1; 1 to 3-6; Daily Checks; and Weekly and Monthly Checks
Reasons for Changing Jobs	Terminations = 18 and Layoffs = 18 Across 21 Different Workers

## Related Publications

Brown, L., Nisbet, J., Ford, A., Sweet, M., Shiraga, B., York, J., et al. (1983). The critical need for nonschool instruction in educational programs for severely handicapped students. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 8, 71-77.

Luecking, R., & Certo, N. (2003). Integrating service systems at the point of transition for youth with significant support needs: A model that works. *American Rehabilitation*, 27, 2-9.

Wehman, P., & Kregel, J. (1998). *More than a job: Securing satisfying careers for people with disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Wehman, P. (2006). Integrated employment: If not now, when? If not us, who? *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 31(2), 122-126.

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