

# Integrating Individuals with Developmental Disabilities into the Open Labor Market

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study addresses attitudes concerning employing individuals with developmental disabilities (DD) and identifies factors limiting their integration into the workplace. Four themes emerged: lack of infrastructure, awareness, family support, and the need for ongoing training and development. A proposed model of integrating individuals with DD in the workplace is discussed.

Historically, people with DD were considered unfit for work and, hence, rarely a part vocational training and work activities. Many individuals with DD lived in restrictive environments isolated from their communities, minimizing their opportunities for independence, productivity and social integration. This environment created unfavorable attitudes that reinforced their marginalization (Konig & Schalock, 1991).

The issue of integrating individuals with DD into the workforce has become a nationwide agenda. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) has recognized the importance of the transition of students with exceptional needs from school to the workplace and adult life. The goal of disability and rehabilitation research is to maximize the inclusion, social integration, employment, and independent living of individuals with developmental disabilities (Melia, Pledger, & Wilson, 2003). The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research has focused on developing new methods, technologies, and approaches for eliminating the environmental, cultural, and social barriers that prevent people with disabilities from full inclusion in all aspects of society. Despite these efforts and studies that have demonstrated most individuals with DD (even severe disabilities) are very capable of exceptional job performance (Bellamy, Rhodes, Mank, & Albin, 1988; Konig & Schalock, 1991), over 75% of individuals with DD remain unemployed (U.S. Department of Census, 2000). The barriers faced by workers with disabilities when entering the workforce are enormous, and employer attitudes can be a major impediment to employment (Bolton & Roessler, 1985).

Employers who have had limited experience interacting with disabled employees may believe that they present too many problems (Nathanson & Lambert, 1981) or that they are neither capable of performance nor able to meet the employer's expectations. Yet recent surveys of employers of individuals with developmental disabilities reveal general satisfaction with work performance when comparing their productivity, turnover rates, absenteeism, and safety risks with those of non-disabled employees, according to a national organization on mental retardation (ARC, 2001). It is vital that we (researchers) as well as members within organizations (executives, managers and other employees) are aware of and understand an organization's attitudes and consequent behaviors to effectively interact with developmentally disabled employees (Nathanson & Lambert, 1981). Understanding organizational members' attitudes may eliminate attitudinal barriers through the creation of a new awareness around the enthusiasm, capabilities and successful performance of individuals with DD, leading to more favorable attitudes. The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes that employers and members of organizations have towards individuals with DD and to identify factors that facilitate integration of people with DD into the open labor market. Two research questions guided the study: (a)

What are three employers' attitudes concerning employing individuals with DD and (b) What are factors limiting the employment of individuals with DD?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Despite suffering from social disadvantages, many individuals with developmental disabilities view employment as important to them (Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Verbrugge, 1999), yet many remain unemployed (Konig & Schalock, 1991). Over the last few decades, several vocational rehabilitation approaches were developed aiming to improve the employability of people with DD including prevocational training programs, sheltered workshops and transitional employment. However, these traditional approaches did not significantly improve the employability of people with DD, failing to meet their objectives (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). A new paradigm of a socioecological framework for understanding disability encourages researchers to acknowledge the dynamic interaction between the person with DD and the environment (e.g., the work place) (Engel, 1977; Tate & Pledger, 2003). To facilitate successful integration of individuals with DD in the open labor market, adequate training and development during transition from school to work (Morgan, Ames, Loosli, & Feng, 1995), and development of training programs for supported employment (Handler, Doel, Henry, & Lucca, 2003) are critical. These factors also encourage more independent living and improve the quality of life.

*Transition from school to work* for individuals with DD is a planned process of moving an individual from a school program to adult life in the community (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1997). However, educators and community stakeholders do not share the vision for a continuum of service for students with exceptional needs (Melia & Pledger, 2003). The director of a supported employment agency commented, "Educators feel that their responsibility to students with exceptionalities ends upon graduation and therefore, are not generally involved in planning for the future of these students after graduation." Effective transition planning must consider the multifaceted lives of individuals with DD, including education, community participation, and skills for independent living, social awareness, and employment. Educators need to develop links and raise awareness of community groups, businesses, and vocational institutions for those with exceptional needs to develop to their full potential as participating members of society (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1997).

*Supported employment* enables people with DD to be employed in an integrated employment environment, and to obtain appropriate training, together with ongoing support to maintain employment within an integrative environment, to ensure the best balance between a person's capabilities and interests and the job requirements, as well as to lobby for wages and benefits equal to those of other workers with the same job responsibilities (fair pay) (Bellamy, Rhodes, Mank & Albin, 1988; Konig & Schalock, 1991). Although supported employment has been successful in integrating individuals with DD into the open labor market, it is moving slowly, sparking interest in what the attitudes of employers and organizational members are towards individuals with DD.

### **Methods**

A qualitative approach was employed to develop an understanding of organizational members' perceptions of the developmentally disabled in the workplace, and to identify employers, customers and co-workers' views concerning the key factors that facilitate the integration of individuals with DD into the workplace. The data were gathered through responsive, semi-structured interviews of two job coaches and a supervisor working with individuals with DD. The sample was limited to three individuals, as this was an exploratory

examination of the attitudes of employers, co-workers and customers and the phenomenon of integrating individuals with DD into the open labor market. Data were analyzed by coding interview transcripts for emerging categories, concepts and themes. To strengthen the study, triangulation was employed by using multiple sources of two job coaches and one supervisor in obtaining multiple perspectives to provide corroborating evidence and to shed light on common themes (Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 1978).

### **Emerging Themes**

Based on the literature review, the expectation was to find unfavorable attitudes as the contributing factor to low employment rates of individuals with DD (Konig & Schalock, 1991; Rusch, 1990). However, as the job coaches and supervisor shared their daily experiences and observations around the attitudes of organizational members, other themes emerged as limiting employment factors. The important themes and concepts that emerged were the need for infrastructure to create more employer and employee awareness as well as to provide continual, ongoing training and support. Also important is making sure that the individual's skills, abilities and interests are matched to the job and type of work.

#### *Lack of Infrastructure*

Supported employment aimed at enabling people with disabilities to find meaningful work has helped increase community awareness, eliminate segregation, and dispel unfavorable attitudes of disabled workers. However, due to limited resources and a lack of infrastructure, agencies providing supported work programs are too few to accommodate all individuals with DD. When individuals cannot obtain entry in an agency program, they lack the support or training to help integrate them in the workforce. Typical sheltered workshop staff lacks knowledge of what skills should be taught, how best to teach the skills, and how to structure their programs to facilitate movement toward non-sheltered, competitive employment (Pomerantz & Marholin, 1977). All three participants agreed that because of a lack of infrastructure, many individuals with DD remain unemployed. This inadequate, low percentage of employment leads to a lack of awareness around the capabilities and work attitudes of individuals with DD.

#### *Lack of Awareness of Organizational Members (Employers and Co-workers)*

Organizations, business owners, and managers are reluctant to hire the developmentally disabled because they are unaware of their abilities and the valuable work they can provide (Bellamy et al., 1988) with proper training, development and support. All three participants indicated any existing unfavorable attitudes and uneasiness toward people with DD was partly created due to their limited interaction.

One job coach noted the importance of employers' awareness of people with DD: "I would say that 90% of the people (co-workers, customers) are supportive; however, it is important to raise employer and organizational awareness that people with developmental disabilities are competent and capable individuals." Interaction among employees led to realization that individuals with DD are productive. The participants noted that the more that trained individuals with DD are integrated into the open labor market, the more positive attitudes are created, eliminating biases that many managers currently hold. MM contends, "It is exposure. Some employers don't know what to expect, what these individuals are capable of. It is also a learning process for the employer as well."

#### *Continuous Training and Job-Person Match (Career Development)*

Programs that ensure that the skills and appropriate work behaviors are taught increase the success of supported employment and integration of individuals into the workplace (Bellamy et al., 1988). It is important that tasks and skills are taught and completed in a work setting rather

than in a classroom, as the more closely individuals with DD train in an actual setting, the better their accuracy and job performance (Bellamy et al., 1988). Training allows for individuals to eventually become independent in their job. JD mentioned, “Dan is a good example; he is dropped off in the morning at his work and then he gets picked up in the afternoon.” In addition, matching a person’s abilities and interests to the job or task improves performance (Konig & Schalock, 1991; Leach, 2002). JD observed:

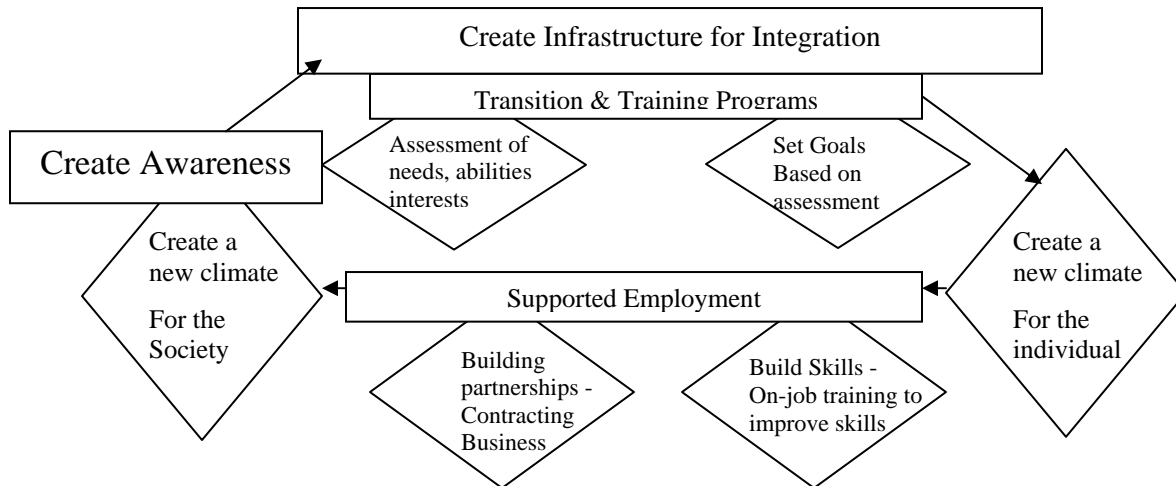
Anna does really great work – she was put on a job site really suitable to her personality. She is very quiet and does not like to talk much. Her job does not require a lot of interaction with others and she is doing really well. Anna is a special case – she was put into a job fit for her to succeed. It is good for everybody around as well.

**Building a Workable Model of Successful Integration**

“People with developmental disabilities make excellent employees, they are enthusiastic, caring and willing to help... they need to be given a chance, and with support they do succeed” (JD). When employing individuals with DD, the most important organizational adjustment is not the adoption of specific policies and programs, but a change in employee attitudes and organizational culture by building an infrastructure that develops and trains individuals with DD to be successful in the open labor market (Leach, 2002). This infrastructure should provide adequate training and development for smooth transitions to work programs, assessing an individual’s needs and setting job goals and objectives that match an individual’s skills, abilities and interests. In addition, supported employment programs should allow for further development on the job and the building of business partnerships that contract and employ individuals with DD. From the findings, a preliminary integration model is discussed (see Figure 1)

Figure 1.

*Workforce Development related to Individuals with Developmental Disabilities*



*Create an Infrastructure for Integration*

Effective vocational resource and job placement programs committed to meeting an employer’s business needs with highly capable and enthusiastic individuals valued as productive members of any work force require an infrastructure of proper transition and training. Transition should include assessing the needs, skills, abilities (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1997) and interests of the individual. Setting objectives and job matching (Konig & Schalock, 1991; Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1997) are integral parts of a successful employment situation for individuals who are

developmentally disabled. Following a transition program, supported employment assists in finding suitable work, providing support, and furthering development of skills.

*Transition –training and development.* Successful transition requires a widespread awareness of the issues and challenges facing individuals with exceptional needs when they leave school and enter the community (Morgan et al., 1995). Transition planning needs to be future focused, identifying a vision for the future and having strategies that work toward the achievement of that vision. In doing so, planning will identify goals and objectives, time lines, roles, and responsibilities for the individual with DD repetition. The transitional planning must work toward facilitation of self-determination, self-advocacy and independent living skills (Rosenberg & Brady, 2000; Wehmeyer et al., 1998).

In addition, ongoing training and development are important and linked with assessing the needs of students and young adults with developmental disabilities to identify their potential career and job paths (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1997). Based on the outcomes of this assessment, efforts should assist in setting goals and objectives that lead to the placement in a work environment that accommodates their interests and abilities (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1997).

*Assessment of needs.* Individuals have different needs, abilities and interests that must be evaluated to ensure that their program of work and support is appropriate. All participants agreed that identifying an individual's strengths and weaknesses and identifying key support areas is crucial in person-job planning. Long-term and short-term goals and objectives need to be identified, responsibility assigned to various people involved in the transition planning and time frames developed for each of the objectives (Wehmeyer et al., 1998). Adaptive skills in the basic area of social and interpersonal skills must be an integral part of any model of training for disabled individuals. Many individuals fail because of personal appearance, poor personal hygiene, and lack of appropriate decision skills (Rosenberg & Brady, 2000). All participants agreed that transition programs must provide appropriate social skill activities to improve interpersonal skills of disabled individuals.

*Goals and objectives based on assessment.* Career and job development helps students to translate personality, skills, abilities and interests into occupational terms and to blend their work role with other life roles in developing a healthy lifestyle (Konig & Schalock, 1991). Individuals with DD need assistance in learning about the structural relationships among occupations and in using goals and strategies to formulate ideas.

*Create a new climate for the individual.* Proper training, assessment and setting objectives lead to a new climate in organizations, and new opportunities for individuals with DD. The next step is to assist the individual in a supported employment program that will lead to a more independent and fulfilling life (Rusch, 1990).

*Supported employment.* Individuals with DD need assistance with employment through the use of mentoring and other supportive services. Successful elements of supported employment emphasize principles of a person-centered approach, beginning with vocational profiling, an excellent tool for job matching, then continuing with training and maintaining elements of supported employment. All supported employment services must be directed toward the changes that lead to increased work effectiveness based on principles of: (a) self-determination – freedom and ability to make choices; (b) person-centered planning – a process of discovery of individual aims, aspirations and skills that focus on the individual rather than service provision constraints; (c) social and economic inclusion – regular life experiences that include family, friends and a social life; (d) choice and independence; (e) employable - all individuals who want to work can work in a job that matches their skills and needs, and (f)

workplace learning – people learn about life by living, not by having life experience in segregated life centers (Leach, 2002).

*Build skills.* Job coaches assist individuals with DD on the job to improve skills and to address potential barriers. They identify the individual's skills and interests; find appropriate jobs; make the necessary startup arrangements; and organize the training, supervision, and support necessary for individuals to keep their jobs for a long period (Wehman & Kregel, 1985).

*Build partnerships.* Although job coaches have been effective in building partnerships with local organizations to employ more individuals with DD, more partnerships and workplaces are required. It becomes a vicious cycle. Organizations will not commit due to their lack the awareness of the capabilities of people with DD. It is difficult to build awareness if organizations are reluctant to hire people with DD. In building awareness, there must be more frequent and constant interaction. More frequent interaction will only begin when successful infrastructure is in place to support individuals with DD.

*Create awareness.* To create awareness among organization about the capabilities and work performance of individuals with DD, a successful working relationship must be mutually beneficial. In hiring an individual with developmental disabilities, employers are bringing a motivated and loyal employee into their organization, creating a more diversified workplace while taking advantage of government tax credits (Konig & Schalock, 1991). For the individual with DD, entering the workforce represents the ultimate validation, a sense of purpose that yields an exceptional eagerness to perform. In an age when recruiting and maintaining reliable unskilled entry-level workers is a problem, employers increasingly hiring individuals with DD are finding a creative and profitable solution.

*Create a new climate for society.* Programs of transition, training and supported employment seek jobs suitable for individuals with DD and provide personal job coaches with on-site training and supervision to new employees, placing workers in a wide range of positions including receptionists, food service workers, porters, and messengers. These programs lead to increased employment opportunities for individuals with DD, which will bring a new awareness to organizational members about the capabilities and enthusiasm that these individuals bring to the workplace.

### **Implications**

The study identified issues that impede the employment of individuals in the open labor market and concludes with a preliminary model of key components for successfully integrating individuals with DD in the workplace. The main objectives are to enable people with DD to be employed in an integrated employment environment, assessing their needs and providing appropriate training together with ongoing support to ensure the best balance between a person's capabilities and interests and the job requirements (Bellamy et al., 1988; Konig & Schalock, 1991; Leach, 2000; Rucsh, 1990). Providing this infrastructure will not only lead to more awareness among organizational members, but will also maintain employment for individuals with DD at equal compensation and benefits, equal to those of other workers with the same job responsibilities (Konig & Schalock, 1991). Increasing numbers of disabled people employed in integrated employment settings and making fair wages reduces dependence on welfare payments and programs and maximizes tax contributions (Konig & Schalock, 1991).

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