

Seeking Quality Supported Employment Services

The following are ideas for questions to ask when interviewing supported employment providers – learning about ways they provide services:

- *Are services personalized or standardized?*
- *How are people’s talents and interests explored?*
- *What are the organization’s experiences negotiating jobs -- matching job seeker talents and interests with employer needs? Or do they always approach their work by “placing” people in existing job openings?*
- *Does the supported employment program build partnerships with businesses regarding supported employee instruction and support – honoring and promoting the typical/natural ways of the business, providing supplemental supports as needed? Or do they “job coach” everyone -- taking over all job training and supports?*

Question: *How do you know what kind of job you’ll be seeking for me (my son, daughter)?*

Things you want to hear: **1)** “We’ll devote time to know you (your son, daughter...) learning about things you do well, like to do; beginning with familiar aspects of life and then building toward new experiences. All this time, we’ll be thinking about fitting job conditions – the nature of work tasks, characteristics for co-workers, kinds of work places that work well...” **2)** “This process takes different periods of time for different people – usually 6 weeks to 3 months. The idea is that we have time to establish a positive working relationship and learn personal aspects about interests and skills that will lead to a fitting and personally fulfilling job.” **3)** “After we’ve gathered enough information about the nature of a good job, we’ll invite a group of interested people to gather so we can network and translate what’s been learned into employment possibilities. We’ll match job characteristics with job tasks; and then match the tasks with types of employers and finally with specific employers and contact people - mapping a way for fitting and effective job development.”

Things you don’t... **1)** “We just ask people what they want to do and if it’s something “realistic” we find it and place them there.” **2)** “We’ll send him to our workshop, (or to the other side of the state) for an evaluation to see what she can do.” **3)** “We’ll start filling out applications right away.” **4)** “Not to worry. We have great relationships with a bunch of employers. We can get you placed in no time. “

Question: *I’ve (my son/daughter has) never been able to find a job where I (he/she) can do all of the responsibilities. So what will you do if I (my son/daughter) can’t do a job description? Frankly, I can’t envision myself (my son or daughter) getting a job.*

Things you want to hear: “If you can’t envision employment, then we need to work together – devoting time to learn more about your (son’s/daughter’s) interest and talents, and things you have to offer within employment. Then we join with others to translate what’s been learned into employment possibilities – seeking employers who have needs that meet the specific skills that you can contribute.

Then, working in partnership with you and employers, we'll seek to negotiate work that matches your skills, talents and interests with their needs – without regard for their predetermined job descriptions. “

Things you *don't*... “Some people are unemployable. All employers have certain production and quality requirements for all of their employees. We ask employers about their requirements and recommend people we think can fulfill these requirements.”

Question: What kinds of support do you provide on the job?

Things you *want to hear:* “We devote time to learn how you (your son, daughter...) can learn best. Then, when we're exploring fitting employers, we study their typical ways of training and supporting new employees. (e.g., How does a new employee learn this task? Who teaches them? How long does it take?) When hired, we use this information to plan, with you and the employer, a way to use the typical ways of learning and support to the fullest extent possible, with our employment specialist providing complementary support or instruction as needed.”

Things you *don't*... 1) “We'll stay with you (your, son or daughter) all the time. **2)** Our job coach (employment specialist) always provides the initial instruction on the job. Then after you learn the job, we fade our support.”

Question: Why did you start providing supported employment? What's your organization's philosophy about employment for people with disabilities?

Things you *want to hear:* “We provide supported employment because it's the right thing to do. In addition to the obvious benefits of earned income, we know that employment influences people's positive sense of place in society, opportunities to contribute, positive perceptions by others, heightened expectations for success in other aspects of life...”

Things you *don't:* “It's what the state wants us to do. It's financially advantageous to our agency to do supported employment. We do supported employment because it's the coming thing. Sheltered workshop days are numbered. Either join or get left behind. “

Other possible questions:

1. *What have you learned? What kind of changes have you made?* Here it will be important to hear that people have a commitment to learning and developing their approaches over time, based on experiences, personal insight, professional development opportunities, outside consultations...
2. *What other services do you provide?* High quality services are most likely to be found in organizations are clearly aligned, throughout any services provided, with practices that invite opportunities for personalized, one-person-at-a-time approaches that involve people served within valued aspects of everyday life.

3. *How many people do you serve and how many employment support people (“employment specialists,” “job coaches”) do you have?* This number of people should be manageable, and sound manageable.
4. *Can you give me an example of someone you’ve been serving since you started? What do his or her services look like? What kinds of jobs has he or she had? How have job/supports changed over time for this person?* The story you’re told about this person should include examples of service flexibility, ways setbacks were handled, expectations for the person’s growth/development and job advancements, and things learned over time.
5. *What experience do you have working with someone having a similar impact of disability?* Even though everyone is unique in more ways than can be described, and the impact of the same disability (e.g., brain injury) will be very different for each person, it’s nonetheless important to be assured that the organization has personnel who’ve devoted the time to learn and understand the social and functional impact of your condition (e.g., brain injury, Asperger’s syndrome, intellectual disability). Or if they have no background regarding the impact of your disability, then it’s important to know they’re committed to learning.
6. *What are the educational and experience background levels of employment specialists? How do they learn about their responsibilities in supported employment?* In Kentucky there are people having a wide range of educational experiences, from high school diploma through master’s degrees, who are excellent employment specialists. Most important in the response to this question is the recruiting, selection and education of employment specialists having high expectations, a vision for quality employment of people represented, and a hunger to study and learn about their work. Of course, it’s important to hear the organization talk about encouraging and promoting participation in on-going educational opportunities.
7. *How often should I (my son/daughter) receive follow-up services after I have a job? What is a long-term support plan? How does your agency pay for long-term support?* Long-term support and on-going follow-up services are essential ingredients of supported employment. All supported employment providers in Kentucky that have a “vendor agreement” with the KY Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), must provide long-term support services. It’s part of their agreement. Varied resources are used to pay for long-term supports and follow-up after people have been successfully “closed” by OVR. Basically, OVR pays for the first part of services and then the supported employment vendor provides long-term supports using Medicaid waiver funds, state funds provided through the local Kentucky regional mental health/developmental disability board, self-pay... A long-term support plan describing the initial nature of services is developed with the supported employee and submitted to the supported employee’s OVR counselor prior to OVR closure of services. And of course the plan needs to be updated periodically according to individual needs.

Long-term support and follow-up includes regular (typically no less than two times a month) follow-up visits on the job, or off the job contacts with the supported employee and supervisors. The idea behind long-term support and follow-up is continuing a partnership between the supported employee and employment specialist about job changes, problem solving on the job, promoting job advancements...

People who are *not* getting the needed levels of follow-up can contact the following people to resolve their concerns: 1) the employment specialist and his or her supervisor, 2) the former OVR counselor who approved the long-term support plan, 3) OVR supported employment consultants - a) Teresa Barney - TeresaA.Barney@ky.gov, b) Gloria Gibson - Gloria.Gibson@ky.gov, c) Debby Smith - Debby.Smith@ky.gov , or d) Carol Estes, the KY OVR Supported Employment Program Administrator - CarolH.Estes@ky.gov, or 4) HDI Supported Employment Training Project staff - a) Milton Tyree, mtyree@uky.edu and b) Katie Wolf Smith, kwolf@uky.edu .

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