

T-TAP

Training and Technical Assistance for Providers

Virginia Commonwealth University & The Institute
for Community Inclusion University of Massachusetts
Boston

October, 2004

Q & A on Customized Employment: Staff Development

Customized employment requires a high level of commitment and skill from the staff that provide employment supports on a day-to-day basis. The job title for these employees may vary and include employment consultant, employment specialist, and job developer or job placement specialist. Some Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) may re-allocate resources and staff from facility-based programs to expand their customized employment services. These individuals may need to develop a new set of skills and values that are very different from direct support roles within the facility-based program. This change may be stressful or even frightening for staff members who are used to working in more controlled settings. This fact sheet discusses strategies that an organization can use to ensure that employment consultants share the same mission and values for promoting competitive, community-based, integrated employment options.



How does having a shared organizational mission and values impact customized employment outcomes?



Unlike more traditional models of facility-based services, employment consultants that support individuals in competitive jobs function with a high degree of autonomy. They often spend very little time in contact with supervisors and co-workers. Instead, they work independently in constant interaction with job seekers, family members, employers, and members of the community at large. Employment consultants need to be able to articulate and apply the organization's mission and values in day-to-day situations. At the same time, their impact on the quality of the employment relationship between individuals with disabilities and their employers in the community is very high. A consistent shared understanding of the organization's mission and values is critical to ensure that decisions made by employment consultants are consistent with organizational standards and goals.



How does an organization establish consistent shared values among its staff?



Establishing shared values requires that an organization anticipate and directly discuss staff questions and concerns, educate staff on current research, and share promising practices. CRPs must spend dedicated time focusing on vision and values that promote competitive, community-based, integrated employment options, to ensure that staff members have a clear understanding of the direction that the organization is heading. This includes time with the staff talking about the agency's mission and how the mission translates into operational goals. Organizations also need to evaluate policies and departmental or team practice and activities to ensure that practice follows from the desired values. Ask, "Do our policies and practices hold to the stated mission?"



The Office of Disability
Employment Policy,
U.S. Department of Labor



Virginia
Commonwealth
University



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Inclusion at the University of
Massachusetts, Boston

Information for this FAQ sheet came from:

T-TAP (Training and Technical Assistance for Providers)

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T-TAP is funded by the Department of Labor (DOL), Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) cooperative agreement # E 9-4-2-01217. The contents of this product do not necessarily represent the interpretations or opinions of DOL. Virginia Commonwealth University, is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution providing access to education and employment without regard to age, race, color, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, veteran's status, political affiliation, or disability. Privacy Policy. If special accommodations or language translation are needed contact Katherine Inge at: kinge@atlas.vcu.edu or Voice (804) 828 - 1851 | TTY (804) 828 - 2494.

Organizations have built values and mission in a variety of ways, but it is clear that building shared values requires a clear and focused investment of organizational resources. An organization could define its commitment to community-based services by identifying specific goals or values. As an example, this could include the following:

- 1) The organization would only provide individual placements.
- 2) Placements would be within the competitive market.
- 3) No placements would be at sub-minimum wage.
- 4) Admission into the organization's program would be zero-reject.
- 5) The organization would continue to provide follow-up and career development services to individuals once they became employed.

Noble of Indiana, a member of the T-TAP CRP Leadership Network, implemented a new service model that built all supports using a detailed person-centered planning process. Staff took a holistic approach to building integrated opportunities for employment, recreation and leisure, and continuing education for the customers in the program. In addition to traditional skill training, staff members were assigned a wide range of values-based reading materials to include disability services, human rights, and business practices. Readings were discussed at weekly meetings.



What is the T-TAP (Training and Technical Assistance to Providers) CRP Leadership Network?



A core group of ten providers comprise T-TAP's CRP Leadership Network. This group of providers are recognized for either having converted their programs from 14 (c) certificates or have made substantial gains in doing so. Staff members from these agencies are serving as Mentors to other CRPs that are interested in advancing customized employment outcomes for the individuals supported by their organizations. To learn more about T-TAP's CRP Leadership Network, please visit

<http://www.t-tap.org>.



What strategies help motivate and inspire staff to work toward the desired outcomes?



Organizations need to measure what they do! Set outcome objectives and measure performance for the organization and for individual staff so that each person knows what the expectations are. Identify performance outcome objectives collaboratively with staff and develop a work plan that outlines activities, timelines, resources, and responsibilities. Finally, it is helpful to produce reports with outcome data. These documents can quantify how things are going with concrete information on number of interviews, jobs, and so forth that occur monthly. Incorporate a continuous quality improvement approach by having each employment consultant develop learning and self-improvement objectives, approaches, and strategies.

Another T-TAP CRP Mentor agency, RISE, Inc., approached issues of inertia at their agency by implementing self-directed teams. These self-directed teams provided an opportunity to build staff ownership of RISE's new priorities as it expanded customized employment. RISE also found that a self-directed team model allowed staff to share the risks and rewards of the new focus on competitive employment, and to share the workload and resources. Finally, self-directed teams nurtured new leadership for the organization and provided a focal point for celebrating success.



What if staff are resistant to implementing customized employment?



Whenever organizations make changes, it is inevitable that people will be worried, fear the change, and possibly be resistant. Change is difficult. Here are some suggestions for agencies needing to address staff concerns. First, know what the opposition arguments will be. Take time to explore the potential concerns of staff, and address those fundamental questions before they are raised. Anticipate core concerns (funding, transportation, and so forth) that could be raised. Think these through ahead of time and be prepared with responses. Next, educate staff about research and practice in the field. Tell them what is and is not working. This sharing of promising practices provides direction for staff. Finally, sharing the successes of the agency in placing individuals in customized community employment builds morale and encourages staff members to keep striving for success.

Q How do employment consultants systematically build skills to implement customized employment strategies?

A Organizations need to implement strategies that clearly identify and catalog the skills that each position requires. Then, they need to systematically plan for an array of intervention and assessment strategies to ensure that staff possess and use those skills. RISE, Inc. used several approaches to redefine staff roles and develop an individualized approach to skill development. This included conducting an agency-wide survey of critical skills and training priorities, reworking job descriptions, and implementing a cross-functional team to review job roles and priorities.

The revised job descriptions resulted in the development of a detailed job skills inventory for each position. The job skills inventory became the basis for Individual Staff Development Plans including an overall agency staff development plan. The job inventory is organized around job functions, competencies/skills, a priority ranking, and documentation of skill mastery. There is a development plan for each job function. This provides the organization with a systematic approach to planning training needs and monitoring individual staff development. Sample job functions and competencies from RISE Inc.'s Job Skills Inventory for a Job Placement Specialist include the following examples.

Sample Job Placement Specialist Job Functions and Competencies

- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Facilitate meetings with participants and career planning team.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Understand staff meeting protocols and document decisions made.
- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Support participants with budget & financial planning.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Understand SSI, SSDI, SSA work incentives & other government income maintenance programs.
- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Contact employers & provides job development services.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Become knowledgeable about job development methods and strategies.
- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Coordinate fiscal work incentives for employers.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Understand how to arrange OJT & WORTC options.
- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Provide ADA training & technical support for employers.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Understand ADA provisions & compliance factors.
- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Coordinate and/or offers training and related support for participants placed on the job.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Become knowledgeable about natural supports & job coach training methods. Understand workplace support strategies.
- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Coordinate job placement services with workforce centers and other partners.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Become knowledgeable about job networking techniques.
- **Job Function** (*What I do*) -- Coordinate services with other career planning team members.
Competency/skill (*What I need to know*) -- Understand the role of the vocational rehabilitation agency, county social services, secondary education, and other representatives.

Q What strategies can an organization use to support continuous learning and self-improvement?

A There are a number of strategies that can be used to support staff learning and self-improvement as well as organizational change. One of the best ways to incorporate new service delivery ideas is by visiting organizations that are known to be running unique or exemplary program services. Tour other programs, meet with their employment consultants, view direct service strategies or methods in action, and examine the benefits and outcomes that these programs produce for consumers.

Pre-service training or orientation programs are commonly used by community rehabilitation agencies to support the learning needs of new employees as well as introduce them to their agency. The first step, of course, is to involve each person in his / her plan. Adults learn best when they can identify their own goals and objectives.

Some employment consultants may benefit from maintaining journals to record information about their job performance and professional experiences. These self-appraisals offer opportunities to record information about their perceived skill development needs, technical issues that they encounter on the job, or new learning experiences needed to enhance job performance. A journal is especially helpful to new employment consultants who are learning their job. It provides a record of discussion points for future reference and meetings with supervisors.

Educational or training strategies that have an interactive or experiential component may be the most beneficial to employment consultants learning new or advanced direct service skills. These can be formal or informal relationships with skilled mentors and offer employment consultants expert guidance and encouragement concerning the knowledge and skills that they need to reach their full potential as practitioners. The objective is to provide guided work experiences, role modeling, and expert coaching so the introduction of essential knowledge and skills are mastered to desired levels of proficiency. Of course, one way to accomplish this is to encourage job shadowing for new employees with experienced employment consultants within the agency.

Another T-TAP CRP Mentor Agency, Cobb / Douglas Community Services Boards, recommends that staff identify group reading such as professional journal articles, books, or other publications. The agency sets aside time from staffs' busy schedules to read book chapters, publications, and newsletters that feature timely articles, emerging research, and current information vital to customized employment practices. Then, they meet as a group to discuss the implications for their agency's service delivery.

An agency might choose to establish a staff development and training committee. Staff development committees are often charged with identifying the agency's staff training needs and implementing action plans based on budgetary constraints and a consensus about priorities. Again, it is important to include the individuals who will be receiving training in the design and identification of the topics.



Where can an organization go to find training for its staff?



T-TAP offers a number of distance learning opportunities that are available at no charge or for a nominal cost at <http://www.t-tap.org>. Recognized leaders in facilitating customized employment outcomes are producing the information, and staff can log on and hear the presentations any time at their convenience or live at a pre-arranged schedule. Distance learning provides exciting opportunities for employment consultants who are interested in continuing education but unable to leave their jobs for an extended period.

Agencies also may look to their local community colleges to find adult education programs that meet staff training needs. Employment consultants may enroll in adult education programs as part of an individual development plan for a number of reasons. First, they may use these programs to continue their career ladder progress towards a longer-term career objective. Second, they may address immediate skill development needs to improve job performance. Third, employment consultants may acquire advanced level practitioner skills and increase their performance to the highest levels possible.

There are ten regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Programs (RCEPs) in the United States specifically dedicated to the training and staff development needs of employment consultants. These specialized RCEPs for employment consultants are distributed in ten regions of the country. The primary audiences for these regional RCEPs are direct service, supervisory, administrative, and volunteer staff from community rehabilitation agencies that are involved in obtaining and supporting participant outcomes. An online search can provide more information on where these programs are located or go to <http://www.nchrtm.okstate.edu/resources/rcep.html> for a listing and contact names.

Many organizations report the intrinsic value of national and state conferences as well as local workshops as a means for staying current with their colleagues and leading edge practices in the field. Although it may be difficult to find the budget resources or time to attend staff development conferences, they are absolutely crucial to employment consultant learning and must be encouraged by their rehabilitation agencies. Short-term conferences and workshops tend to energize employment consultants with new ideas and encourage infusion of leading edge practices in their daily work.

**For additional information, you may contact: ODEP -- (202) 693-7880 or
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For more information on T-TAP, please visit: <http://www.t-tap.org>