

***Job Site Supports  
Suggestions for Supporting Persons with Disabilities on  
Job Sites***

***A White Paper by Michael Callahan***

### *Overview Considerations*

Providing quality and effective job supports is one of the more rewarding work activities that you'll ever do. The role is varied and includes support, training, communication, interpretation and negotiation. And while these materials will try to clarify aspects of quality support, the role is occasionally confusing. The supports are provided in someone else's business and job coaches are often viewed as outsiders. Current employees, supervisors and even customers will wonder who you are and what your role is. Questions will be asked and directions will be given. This information is designed to answer some of those questions and to clarify any uncertainties so you will be comfortable and effective in your duties.

Let's start with the idea of disability. It's likely that you have heard of many of the various labels associated with having a disability – intellectual disability, bi-polar disorder, autism, cerebral palsy, schizophrenia and a host of other terms that indicate a person is somehow different from the rest of us. This assumed difference has caused many people in our society to be cautious or even fearful of anyone with a disability. Regarding employment, most persons (75% or so) with disabilities are unemployed. We will start with what it means to have a disability.

Instead of focusing on a particular label or cause of disability, we recommend that job site support staff focus on the *impact* of a person's disability on their life, in this case on their employment. A person labeled with mental retardation might *require more time to learn tasks than others*. A participant with cerebral palsy might *use a wheelchair for mobility around the workplace*. An employee with an anxiety disorder might *need time to gather their emotions before returning to work*. If we look for ways to explain in simple, human terms the impact of disability rather than the label, it's possible for others to understand the things we share instead of the things that are different.

### *Suggestions:*

- 1. Individuals with disabilities are people first. Therefore use "people first" language when referring to **people** with disabilities. For example say, "This project is for participants with disabilities." instead of "This project helps the disabled to work."*
- 2. If asked about a participant's label say (for example), "I am not allowed to talk about a diagnosis, but she uses hearing aids to better hear what is said to her."*
- 3. Speak in an age appropriate, respectful tone to the individual. Don't raise your voice or use a "sing-song", child-like tone when talking.*
- 4. Don't hold hands for support. Offer assistance, if needed, by having the participant grasp your elbow or forearm.*
- 5. Ask the participant before offering any support. Don't assume that they will or will not want to be assisted. And ask each time you feel a support need arises.*

6. *Avoid speaking for the participant. When a supervisor or co-worker is speaking to or about the participant, look at the participant and wait a moment for them to respond. If the participant does not respond, encourage the participant to do so rather than answering for the participant.*
7. *If you are uncertain about any question or circumstance, let the other party know that you are not sure how to correctly answer and then call your transition specialist for direction.*
8. *Spend some time getting to know the individual outside the workplace. If possible, visit the participant's home or classroom. Consider having a quick snack at a café or offer a ride home from school. Talk about what the participant does for recreation, what they do at school or other interests.*
9. *If the participant asks you do something that you feel the participant should be doing, gently let them know that they should be doing the task. However, if a participant is confused or fatigued, consider offering either support or a break so as to resolve the issue.*

### ***Before your participant starts to work – Perform a Job Analysis***

Ideally, you should visit the work site *before* the participant starts his/her job. Get the name of the employer – owner, supervisor, personnel manager, etc. – before you visit. Call the appropriate person and ask if you can come in for a brief time, say thirty minutes or an hour, to get to know people and to look at job duties the participant will be performing. You can get employer information from your transition specialist and they may be willing to set up the visit for you.

This visit allows you to conduct a *Job Analysis* of the workplace and the duties to be performed by the participant. Your transition specialist can provide you with a form that you can fill out in pencil or pen that will allow you to capture information about the work site. Your main focus will be to observe *how the employer does things*. The Job Analysis form is simply a structure to help you gather and identify all the important information on an employment site.

The Job Analysis process focuses first on the features of the work place. Note the way employees perform their job tasks. Are they done consistently? Do they work constantly, without breaks? How often does the supervisor interact with employees? Do employees wear uniforms or special clothes? How are new employees trained? Who does the training? All of these issues are included on the Job Analysis form. Your Transition Coordinator might also be able to assist you with information on these questions.

#### ***Suggestions:***

1. *Following a brief tour of the business, ask to observe the kinds of tasks to be performed by the participant in his/her job duties.*

2. *Try to get a mental picture of the way each task should ideally be performed. If you are in doubt, ask the employer to show you the way they want to see the task performed.*
3. *Watch the performance of the tasks to be performed, not just the final result. For instance, observe the way a retail clerk folds a shirt instead of simply how it looks when it is folded.*
4. *Ask for permission to work each of the tasks the participant will perform. Ask for the employer to teach you the task the way they typically teach any new employee. Try to work the each task until you get the feel of the task performed correctly.*
5. *A full Job Analysis typically will take longer than your initial visit, so you might need another visit of an hour or so to finish the process. You should expect to be paid for the time you spend performing a Job Analysis, including completing the form.*
6. *Introduce yourself to and write down the names of the employer, lead supervisor and all direct co-workers so you can introduce them to the participant.*
7. *Note all requirements for clothing (uniforms?), grooming (mustaches?) , restrictions (piercings?) and safety rules (closed-toed shoes?) that the employer might have for employees.*
8. *Ask about the activities of the participant's first day of work – orientation procedures, tests, forms and other activities.*
9. *Discuss with the employer who will do what on the first days of work regarding training, orientation and other start-up concerns.*

### ***Getting started on the job – your role in job support***

You will be part of an assistance strategy known as *supported employment*. This concept began over 20 years ago when it became evident that some individuals needed more support to perform their jobs than was typically available from their employers. The concept of an outside *job coach* or *employment specialist* was created to assist both employers and their supported employees to experience success.

While this idea may seem straightforward, supported employment requires a delicate finesse to do well. The participant you work with might need considerable supports, beyond those offered to most employees. However, if you simply step in and take over, most employers will step back and let you take over. This works in the short term but it creates problems the longer the participant is employed. It is critical to allow and even to encourage those at the workplace to have the primary responsibility for orientation, support, training and encouragement of the participant employee.

Your primary job is to assist the employer and your participant to work effectively together. In a secondary role, you might be asked to substitute for the employer by providing direct training and supervision to the participant. This is an allowable part of your job, but it is full of pitfalls. Some employers and participants will quickly become dependent on your availability and simply presume that you will always be there to fill in. It is important for you to understand that this project does not have funds to pay any job supporter for long-term, on-going supports. While each

situation is unique, your most successful work occurs when the employer owns the primary responsibility for support.

You may anticipate that the participant will need more support early in employment and he/she should require less as time passes. During the initial days of employment, you should plan to spend the same time as the participant on the job site. As the participant acquires skills and confidence, you might negotiate with the employer to spend less time at the job site. Consult your Transition Coordinator for guidance on these decisions.

### *Suggestions:*

- 1. Make sure you have the participant's schedule, in writing, before the first day of work, as well as the supervisor's phone number and work schedule.*
- 2. "If things can go wrong, they will." Murphy's Law is common on job sites so plan your commute accordingly. Don't wait until the last moment to leave for work.*
- 3. Remind the employer of the plans discussed during Job Analysis concerning initial supports and orientation procedures.*
- 4. If you are not responsible, initially, for providing supports you should find an observation position close enough to hear what is being said but far enough away to reduce the focus on your presence.*
- 5. Dress in a manner consistent with the setting, including wearing a uniform, vest or smock, if asked by the employer.*
- 6. While observing, take discrete notes of issues or ideas that can be discussed later.*
- 7. Keep your cell phone turned off while providing support to the participant as well as avoiding other personal interruptions.*
- 8. Offer suggestions and comments to both the employer and the participant in a non-work time, individually, whenever feasible.*
- 9. If you feel the need to step in to offer assistance do it quickly and unobtrusively and step back to an observation position as soon as possible.*
- 10. If you see something of a troubling or concerning nature, contact your Transition Coordinator as soon as possible.*
- 11. At the end of each of the initial days of employment, ask the employer or supervisor for their perspective of the day's performance. Address any concerns and let your Transition Coordinator know if employer concerns are not easily accomplished.*

### ***Providing instruction and job supports***

As an employment specialist your primary role is to facilitate the success of the employee with whom you are working. As indicated in the information regarding getting started on the job, there may be some misunderstandings regarding your role. For instance, employers may assume your role is to relieve them of any responsibility in training or supervising the participant employee. This is not the case. Your role is to assist the employer and the new employee to work effectively together. The participant

might feel that you are there to do their job for him or her. This is also not the case. While it may occasionally be necessary to temporarily assist the participant with job duties if they become overly fatigued or if there is a critical need by the employer, your role is not to do the participant's job.

It may be necessary, however, to fill in for supervisors, lead co-workers or even owners in the provision of instruction directly to participant employees. We urge you to take every opportunity to encourage the typical employees in your work setting to take every opportunity to train and supervise the employee who you support. There will be occasions, however, when you will need to step in and become a substitute trainer. Think of yourself as a sort of substitute teacher. The tasks that you will perform are not to be your primary responsibility; rather you will be filling in until the regular supporters are available once again. This is a tricky, but necessary, finesse to accomplish for each participant that you support.

When you are called on to teach job tasks, it is important to recall, first, the *way* the employer wants the job done. Remember that mental image of performance that you gained during your job analysis activity. This will be the standard of correctness that you will seek to convey to the participant. Focus far more on the step by step performance of the task and less on the outcome. If the steps of a task are performed correctly, the outcome can only be correct. You might want to jot down a set of step by step procedures that describe the task to be performed. Get the participant's supervisor to review and approve the steps before using them in teaching.

When you begin teaching, try at first to mimic the style and strategies used by supervisors and other trainers who are employed at the business. However, it is possible that these "natural strategies" might not meet the needs of your participant. One of the most important aspects of good teaching is to carefully watch the amount of verbal instructions that you use at any one time. It is far better to use short phrases and concise sentences than it is to provide long paragraphs of information that you hope will be used by the employee for information. Also, don't require the participant to observe performance too long before they get started. Generally, it's much better to demonstrate a task a time or two and then get the employee engaged in the performing the task. Then you can use the time during work to fine tune their performance.

Be careful about the amount of reinforcement that you use. For instance, avoid saying, "Good Job!" after every attempt by the participant. Like everyone else, participants with disabilities need to know they are doing well or at least trying to do well, but it is important not to create either a dependency on your reinforcement (it's sort of like a caffeine addiction) or to use strategies that cause participants to be seen as different from other employees. The best approach is to be age appropriate, subtle and genuine. If your participant does well, simply tell them so. A pat on the back and a sincere, "You are really doing nicely" is much better than "high fives" and constant "good jobs".

### *Suggestions:*

1. *Think of your role more as a facilitator – a person who makes things happen – rather than a “trainer” or “coach”.*
2. *When you need to provide training to the employee, always consider the way the company does things, first.*
3. *Focus on the way tasks are performed, based on your image of correctness from the job analysis, more than simply whether the final result is correct or not.*
4. *Be extremely careful of the amount of verbal information that you provide at any one time – less is better.*
5. *Don’t ask the participant to observe someone working for too long. Usually only one or two cycles of the task is sufficient before allowing the learner to engage the task.*
6. *Use subtle informing cues such as gestures, modeling of movements and short verbal cues during teaching.*
7. *If you need to touch the participant during teaching, be gentle, let go as soon as possible and don’t reach around like some lecherous golf pro.*
8. *Jot down the steps of a task that you feel the learner might find difficult to perform.*
9. *If the participant successfully completes a part of the task, say nothing, and continue to focus on successful completion of each step.*
10. *The best time to offer encouragement and affirmation is when the participant does not expect it.*
11. *Remember, you are a model to others in the work place regarding the manner in which you interact with the participant. Model respect, age-appropriateness and normalcy.*
12. *If you see a teaching problem between the supervisor and employee, discretely offer suggestions to both parties on how to be more effective.*
13. *If you feel it is necessary to step in or stop training between your employee and a supervisor, step away as soon as you’ve offered your information.*
14. *Your job is not to be a surrogate boss for the participant. Never reprimand the participant but rather have discussions about your concerns and let your Transition Coordinator know about difficult situations.*