

Success in supported employment for people with learning difficulties

Supported employment is a service that enables people with learning difficulties to find and hold down real jobs in unsegregated workplaces. An in-depth study of sixteen supported employees in South Wales looked at the strategies of supported employees, employers and job coaches for making supported employment successful. Self-advocates acted as consultants on the project and helped the researchers define what 'success' in supported employment might mean. The research found:

-  **Anti-discriminatory policies and practices in the workplace, e.g. in recruitment, training and job tasks, can ensure that supported employees participate fully at work.**
-  **Support from supported employment agencies needs to be on-going and may be vital at critical points, e.g. when there is a change of management or workplace culture.**
-  **Accessible two-way communication ensures that positive feedback can be given to supported employees and their concerns can be raised with management. Examples of how this was achieved include: having regular job chats, everyday access to a line-manager, efforts by employers to understand how people with learning difficulties communicate, including non-verbally.**
-  **Supported employees and their employers recognised the importance of punctuality, reliability, enthusiasm, friendliness and social awareness at work.**
-  **Supported employees were better able to mix socially at work when they were trained in social skills and their colleagues were made aware of some of the difficulties faced by supported employees, especially those who had not worked before.**
-  **Job coaches indicated that they sometimes faced a dilemma as to whether supported employees should be trained to follow official work rules or model themselves on colleagues in order to fit in better in the workplace.**
-  **Job coaches felt that relying on natural support from colleagues was too unreliable – it is better to get support from a member of staff in a supervisory role so that when personnel change support can continue.**

Introduction

Fewer than ten per cent of people with learning difficulties are in paid employment. Supported employment aims to increase participation in work by people with learning difficulties. Specialist agencies provide the necessary support for people with learning difficulties to find and hold down a real job in an unsegregated workplace. It is largely publicly funded through a mixture of local authorities, the devolved assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and the Scottish Parliament, as well as central government at Westminster and the European Social Fund. In supported employment, job coaches train supported employees on the job, or support them through employers' training. Usually the job coach will then withdraw from the workplace and the goal is for the supported employee to be integrated into the workforce and perform the job in the same way as other staff members. The research identified strategies for success in supported employment.

Defining success

Self-advocates helped the researchers define what 'success' in supported employment for people with learning difficulties might mean. To be successful, self-advocates recommended meeting employers' demands by: having the right employee attitude, having good social skills and being able to adapt to workplace culture. The self-advocates suggested that success would be reflected in employers' and colleagues' attitudes, such as being treated with respect, having job satisfaction and developing personally. Job coaches and employers, the self-advocates proposed, would fulfil their obligations by ensuring the supported employees knew their rights, had a good job match and opportunities to move to other jobs/employers.

Guided by the self-advocates' definitions, the researchers asked 16 supported employees about their jobs. The supported employees ranged in age from early twenties to late forties, none were from ethnic minorities and only four of them were women, reflecting the demographics of supported employees in the area. Employers and job coaches were also asked for their views.

Strategies for success in work

Doing the job well

Supported employees in the study demonstrated a clear grasp of what was expected at work. For example, one woman who worked as a cleaner in the kitchen of a nursing home said:

"Work hard, always be on time, be friendly to everyone and make sure you do your work the same as others."

Training supported employees for work

Job coaches suggested that sometimes it was necessary to train supported employees in the requirements of work and to encourage a work ethic, particularly when they had not been employed before. The trainee researcher on this project, then aged 41, had previously worked for only one year, having spent most of his adult years in an Adult Training Centre. Recent initiatives in supported employment have given some teenagers the opportunity to have part-time jobs after school and at weekends, affording them the opportunity to experience the demands and rewards of working so that the world of work is not alien to them when adults.

Training supported employees for particular workplace environments

Job coaches identified workplace culture as a complex issue which caused them a dilemma as to whether to train supported employees to follow official rules and 'stick out like a sore thumb' or follow the more informal examples of colleagues. As one job coach said:

"You're training somebody sometimes to do things the wrong way, if that makes sense ... because if you train them to do it by the book they're going to stand out, and sometimes the whole company knows it goes on and it's acceptable behaviour but that's about you judging it and then about you being able to relay that to the person you're training, but sometimes that's not easy."

Training in social awareness – for supported employees and their colleagues

Training supported employees in social skills was also sometimes necessary, as was raising awareness amongst colleagues of the difficulties faced by people with learning difficulties who have never had an opportunity to mix with people at work before. One job coach said:

"If somebody was particularly shy I would make a point of saying to the other staff members '...if you can, encourage them to join in the conversation...'"

Employers' strategies: communication

Two-way communication between employers and supported employees was also identified as important: it enabled supported employees to express concerns and ask questions and employers were able to give feedback on how the supported employee was performing. One manager facilitated communication by the proximity of his office to the factory floor, while another held regular 'job chat' sessions where views could be expressed. Two employers had made efforts to understand their supported employees who had speech impairments, ensuring that the workplace was not disabling for them.

Employers' strategies: breaking down disabling barriers

Anti-discriminatory policies and practices were vital for ensuring that supported employees had equal opportunities at work. For example, the researchers themselves adapted their employer's procedures when recruiting a trainee researcher with learning difficulties so that taped applications were accepted and the induction programme was adapted. Similarly, the manager of a supported employee who worked as a chambermaid ensured that she was teamed with someone who could read and write for training exercises.

On-going support and training – from employers and agencies

Job coaches perceived problems in allowing natural support to occur at work. They preferred a supervisory member of staff to be appointed as the support when the job coaches had left the workplace,

so that the support could continue as part of that supervisor's role even if personnel changed. As one job coach said:

"At the end of the day, that natural support might be off sick, on holiday, get pregnant, whatever, they might not be around each time..."

One of the supported employees was trained in a job in which he was doing well, but when a new manager came to the workplace he was taken off that job and moved to one requiring fewer skills. This suggests that on-going support from agencies should be available at critical times, such as a change of management or workplace culture.

Support for all employees

The researchers' own experience as supported employee, employers and colleagues made them realise that everybody needs support at work, e.g. one of them benefited from support following periods of maternity leave which enabled flexible working arrangements, while another was allowed to work on days which fitted in with her other work commitments.

Conclusion

Strategies utilised by supported employees, colleagues, job coaches and employers can all help make supported employment successful. All of the participating supported employees enjoyed their jobs. Recent Government policy has emphasised the importance of supported employment to ensure that people with learning difficulties can participate fully in society and maximise their potential. The introduction of the Workstep programme in 2001 demonstrates a commitment to supported employment, but the researchers are concerned that there is an assumption that every supported employee will be able to 'progress' to open employment. This may not be the case for some supported employees with severe impairments, and in any case, provision should be made to ensure that support is available at crucial points in every supported employee's career, e.g. when management changes.

About the project

The research was carried out in 2001 by Stephanie Jones, Jeff Morgan, Dé Murphy and Julia Shearn at the University of Wales College of Medicine's Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities, using qualitative research methods. Detailed case studies of five supported employees were made, including interviewing them three times each, visiting their places of work and speaking to their employers, colleagues and job coaches. In addition eleven other supported employees and seven job coaches took part in focus groups. A consultation group of self-advocates from People First Wales advised at each stage of the project, from defining what 'success' in supported employment might mean, through to dissemination.

How to get further information

For further information on the research, and details of the full report, contact Julia Shearn or Stephanie Jones c/o University of Wales College of Medicine, Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities Applied Research Unit, Meridian Court, North Road, Cardiff, CF14 3BG (Telephone: 02920 691795).

The full report, **Making it work: Strategies for success in supported employment for people with learning difficulties** by Stephanie Jones, Jeff Morgan, Dé Murphy and Julia Shearn, is published for the Foundation by Pavilion Publishing (ISBN 1 84196 053 5, price £12.95).