

T-TAP

Training and Technical Assistance for Providers

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

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Q & A on Customized Employment:

Workplace Supports

All workers, not just individuals with disabilities, require different types, levels, and intensity of supports in their work places. Businesses provide supports to their employees and offer them a wealth of resources during the normal course of business. However, some employers may need additional assistance in creating workplace cultures that are supportive of individuals with disabilities. This additional assistance or workplace supports may be provided by an agency such as a Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP). The goal is to work with employers so that businesses can increase their capacity to support workers with disabilities. This fact sheet will address some of the commonly asked questions about the level and intensity of workplace supports that individuals with disabilities may need to obtain and maintain employment.

Q

What are workplace supports?

A

Workplace supports typically exist in a business and are available to all employees. They may include but are not limited to such things as a co-worker mentor who assists an employee in learning the job, a supervisor who monitors work performance, a co-worker who assists the new worker in developing social networks, or making maximum use of orientation training. This also could include other company sponsored training events, programs and benefits such as an employee assistance program. Workplace supports also may be specifically designed to assist a particular employee with his or her job performance. This could include modifications to the work environment, adjustments to employment policies or practices, and/or changes in the way certain job functions are performed that allow the employee to get the job done successfully.



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Q**What are some examples of workplace supports that may already exist in a business?****A**

Three major categories of workplace supports that may already exist in a business are environmental, procedural, and natural. Environmental supports are defined as physical structures, surroundings, or objects present in the business that make the job site more accessible for current or future employees. For example, automatic door openers may be available when entering the building or signage on the walls may help employees successfully navigate from one department to another. Procedural supports are actions or activities that employers provide to assist potential or current employees with performing their jobs and job related functions. For instance, flextime may be offered to allow employees to work within the hours that are more conducive to their personal lives. Natural supports exist in any workplace and are informal supports that are typically available to any employee. This might include worker's sharing rides to and from work, a senior staff member helping a new co-worker get the job done when he/she needs extra assistance.

Q**How will staff know what workplace supports are needed?****A**

Sometimes, job selection can reduce support needs. For example, a job that is negotiated to highlight a person's strengths and accentuate abilities may help eliminate the need for adding workplace supports. Initially observing what a worker can do can also help determine what, if anything, is needed. At times an individual's support needs will be obvious. For example, a person who uses a wheelchair for mobility will need an accessible workplace or modifications to the existing environment. Other times, the necessary support may not be readily apparent. Worker behaviors that may signal the need for providing additional workplace supports are failing to initiate an activity, not switching job tasks, difficulty performing a duty, inability to meet established production standards, repeatedly asking for assistance, or making the same mistakes over and over again.

Q**Can't individuals with disabilities access workplace supports on their own?****A**

The person with the disability may already know or have some ideas of what he or she needs. At other times, the individual may need guidance. Taking advantage of the support resources that are available in a workplace may not automatically occur for many individuals with disabilities.

Even if a resource exists, the individual may not know how to access or benefit from its use. He/she may be unaware of the potential support, how to choose among the support alternatives that are available, or how to access a desired resource. In addition, a company may have varying levels of resource options. For instance, one company may have an intensive orientation and training program while another has none. The existing workplace supports within any company must be analyzed to determine if they meet the needs of the individual with a disability who has been hired. A one time, two-hour lecture on company policies may be of little benefit, while a co-worker who explains the "unwritten rules" of the workplace to the new employee with a disability may be an extremely valuable resource.

CRP staff, such as an employment specialist, can initially take the role of helping the individual identify, choose, and access the needed supports at whatever level of assistance that the individual prefers. This would of course include helping the employer identify and provide the needed workplace supports. The goal is to assist the business in supporting the individual with a disability rather than the person continually relying on the CRP staff.

Q

Are workplace supports the same thing as reasonable accommodations?

A

These words are sometimes used synonymously; however, there are differences. Some employers may be more open to hearing about “workplace supports” since “reasonable accommodation” may conjure up unwarranted fears about complying with the law and costs associated with accommodations. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) employers must provide reasonable accommodations to a qualified individual with a disability. A qualified individual with a disability is someone who can perform the essential functions of a job with or without reasonable accommodation. Many businesses will have a policy in place on how a request for accommodation should be handled.

Some examples of workplace supports that might be useful to an employee with a disability include having a co-worker prompt him or her to take a break, having an employment specialist provide additional job skills training; creating a quiet work area; giving an employee a written list of job duties to perform at the start of each shift, replacing a manual stapler with an electronic one, or allowing a change in the usual work schedule. Support needs vary from person to person, thus it should come as no surprise that workplace supports must be tailored to the particular situation on hand. What works for one employee in one workplace will not necessarily be effective for someone else in another business.

Q

Are workplace supports expensive?

A

Workplace supports do not have to be expensive. An exemption from or modification to an existing work place policy is not costly. For example, a simple change in an existing workplace policy that requires employees to work every other Saturday may be modified for a worker who due to the nature of the disability has no access to transportation on this day of the week. Co-worker support also results in no charge. For example, a co-worker may work along side another worker and model the pace needed to meet the employer’s production standard. Other simple strategies are not costly such as a warehouse worker using a computer print out to remind him of what stock to pull and where to locate various items.

When supports are purchased or fabricated the cost will vary depending on what is needed. However, most often supports are not expensive. For example, an office worker may need to have the regular computer mouse replaced with a track ball mouse, which costs around \$50.00. Or an upholstery worker may need tactile cues, made of velcro, placed on the surface of a table to give information on the size of material to cut which costs about \$4.00.

In any of these examples, the worker may need the additional assistance of an advocate to assist in the negotiation process and the customization of workplace supports. This could require additional funding supports that are available through the One Stop Service Delivery System, Vocational Rehabilitation services, Social Security Work Incentives and so forth.



What is the most effective type of workplace support?



The most effective type of workplace support is the one that works for the individual. For every support need that is identified, a variety of support resources may be available. All of the generated ideas should be discussed with the individual including an explanation of what using the specific support would entail. The availability of the support option, the pros and cons of each, and the level of interest expressed by the individual can be explored at the same time. Assessing these factors also can provide a direction for job selection. For example, one position offers orientation training; another provides co-worker mentoring; and a third job informally supports employees on an individualized basis. The varying levels of support offered by these employment settings combined with other characteristics of the job, such as hours, wages, co-workers and location will influence an individual's decision about where he or she would prefer to work.

In general, strategies should blend into the workplace and not make the worker stand out. Effective supports are designed with employee and employer input. In order to determine if a support is effective, a variety of factors need to be considered. Is the individual satisfied with the arrangement? Be aware that a person who is not using a newly created workplace support may be the employee's way of saying "I feel stupid using this strategy", "I do not know how to use this support" or "I really do not need this". To avoid this situation always include the person with the disability and provide skills training on support use. Next, are the individual's needs being met? How is the support impacting employment (e.g., wages, hours, quality, speed)? Is integration enhanced as a result of the support? Is the employee satisfied? Are the company's standards being maintained?



Summary

It is important to remember that any support is only as good as the outcome it is accomplishing. The most wonderful support may be useless if the individual is not happy or if there are not benefits to the workplace. Flexibility, creativity, and resourcefulness are essential elements contributing to a combination of workplace supports that will meet the individual's needs and result in a job of choice in a community business.

For additional information on customized employment, you may contact:

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For more information on T-TAP, please visit: <http://www.t-tap.org>