

Partners in Employment

Recovery & Rehabilitation Newsletter

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Partners in employment focuses on three allies, who help people navigate the world of work: Employers, family members, and providers.

Employers Creating a Healthy Work Culture

Beth Butler is the Executive Director of the North Carolina Business Leadership Network (NCBLN), a business-to-business nonprofit organization to help North Carolina businesses leverage disability inclusion in the workplace.

There are some unique things that we can do as companies and businesses to improve that mental health wellness in our organizations. Supporting mental health wellness at work will begin to silence the stigma that is so prevalent. And looking to identify and discuss the support that can maximize the success of individuals with mental health issues in the workplace.

The Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act really broadened the definition of disability. 75% of disabilities (U.S. Census Bureau, July 2012) are not obvious, so as employers in our workplaces, we can't simply walk in and judge the workplace in terms of the number of people with disabilities by simply looking around. The impact to our workforce is significant as these conditions affect people during the prime of their working years and impact their ability to fully participate at home and at work. Research tells us (Hanisch, et al, 2016) that because of the societal stigma, the fear of being treated differently at work, the fear of adverse impact at work, or even a lack of access to quality affordable treatment, keeps people from getting the treatment that they need. Mental illnesses can directly affect an employee's ability to perform effectively at work and can be associated with absenteeism and loss of productivity. It's important for employers to foster a work environment that supports education and awareness of mental health issues, training employees and managers on how to identify issues when

they are present right in the workplace, and encourage employees to get the help that's available to them often through benefits or employee assistance programs and get that help in a timely manner.

Some tips to consider in creating a healthy work environment:

1. **Culture.** Start by looking at your organization's culture. Employees need to feel connected and valued. Listening is critical because in order for employees to feel safe enough to tell you what's going on with them, you have to have someone willing to listen. It's important to have managers and supervisors on board to transform a culture in a positive way.
2. **Model.** Healthy workplaces are one with a reasonable workload and demand. We recognize that we are asked to do more with less, but a healthy work environment has healthy work demands. So ask yourself, do managers model that healthy work demand attitude? Do they take time off? Are managers modeling the type of behavior with a work/life balance that we're looking for, and that we want our employees to demonstrate? Are we, as managers, reflective of that?
3. **Growing.** Are managers and employees educated and trained on the importance of maintaining their mental health? So promoting personal growth and development is very important in a work place.
4. **Recognizing.** Can you recognize when someone's having a really great day, when things are going well, or maybe when they're under stress? Sometimes transitioning to a new job can create stress in and of itself. As you begin a new job, or you make a new hire, that can be a trigger for some that have mental health issues. Often what may happen is that because they are a new employee, they don't qualify for any type of medical leave of absence or any of those supports that might be available through the Family Medical Leave Act or some of these other leave policies. It may be that companies need to consider allowing some flexibility in leave policies to support employees who may not qualify for a leave or need some additional days following a leave of absence. If there's a mental health issue that's occurring, building in some flexibility into those policies that can support those employees who may or may not be eligible for certain leaves of absence.
5. **Transitioning.** Consider allowing an employee to transition back to work gradually. The ADA is really clear when it talks about accommodations. A leave of absence may be evaluated as an accommodation in some situations, so evaluating them on a case-by-case basis is always the best practice.
6. **Open enrollment.** It's beneficial to businesses and organizations that have an open enrollment period for their benefits program to be sure and use that

opportunity to communicate to all your employees the company's commitment to their healthy lifestyle that includes mental health and wellness.

7. **Employee Assistance Program.** Many companies are offering space to their Employee Assistance Program vendors that offer counseling services right there onsite. Ease of access encourages self-care.
8. **Physical supports.** Creating a quiet room that's conveniently located in the office space can be a great way to support individuals with mental health issues. Having low lighting is often a great way to add comfort in that room. Have comfortable seating, quiet music, or a white noise machine. Sometimes having a window for natural light with a pleasant view to the outside might be soothing for some individuals. And having a place where someone can go to sit quietly and regroup. Allowing support animals in the workplace also can be helpful.
9. **A flexible schedule.** A schedule that might include flexibility in your start time or your stop time. Medication side effects sometimes affects an individual's ability to get up early for work, or a long day may affect an individual's stamina.
10. **A new employee survey.** A great way for a manager to engage a new employee and to open up communication by asking the employee, how do you like to be managed?

Statistics show us that when employees feel cared for, they're better in sales, they're more innovative and creative, and they're less likely to leave and go across the street and work for somebody else (Kinder, Hughes, & Cooper, 2008).

Families as Partners in Employment

Kathleen Considine, is President of NAMI Massachusetts, and has been a social worker and worked in an employment program in the past. She is a parent of a person with a mental health condition.

The goals for involving families as partners in employment are:

- To recognize the value of family involvement. Other things may change us, but we start and we end as family,
- To dispel myths about family involvement, and
- To provide strategies for families.

So what is the value of the family as a partner in vocational recovery? Families do affect recovery, and at the same time, families really are influenced by that recovery. It is a Kabuki dance between the two, of the family influencing and then the family being

affected. And as allies and navigators, families play diverse roles, but also require a variety of support.

For example, the NAMI Family-to-Family Education Program, which is free and 12 weeks, is quite life altering for people who take it. To be in a position to help and to be a partner, you have to know what you're dealing with so that you're on the same landing strip with the person, who has the mental health condition. Research has indicated that for families, just the idea being there and available to help people in recovery is huge (Drebing, et al, 2016). Helpful families, not just a family in the traditional sense, but a village, including friends, peers, and extended family. People are needed who are able to stand alongside the worker, including those who the person can rely on and look to for strength and knowledge when times are difficult. There's a huge amount of peer support out there, who are inspiring and who can serve as role models. Families who go the extra mile to collaborate together with their loved one and employment providers help to enhance communication. Families have to stand up and be families and be what families do, which is to provide tangible support, such as a ride, or lunch, or help with myriad of things.

In a very tangible basis, families can provide good information about employment resources and support. They can provide continuous emotional support and problem solving. Families affected by mental health conditions can be excellent problem solvers. Don't assume that the job seeker doesn't want family involvement. Sometimes you need to solicit family members' involvement. Families can be valuable in their vocational recovery, especially as they become better versed and more educated.

How can families learn ways to be helpful in vocational recovery? One of the ways that has worked for a number of people is to participate in a NAMI support group and talk with other family members. You learn so much by sharing stories and sharing experiences, to speak with professional caregivers about vocational recovery, and to enroll in a Family-to-Family class.

Family members are able to speak up and advocate with the Department of Mental Health, Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Health & Human Services. We know how to communicate with our family members, we know how they communicate, we know what they're good at, we know what some of their weaknesses can be and their many, many strengths to share that information with an employment specialist.

It's helpful for families to get the same training as the peer recovery specialist. That dynamic is very interesting because it can change the family members' perspectives about what their loved one can and cannot do. It also challenges some of the limited

thinking that we've been taught as family members, or experienced perhaps. Make this a 3-way thing: family members, peers, and staff; in terms of communicating the real information about benefits, incentives, disincentives, and so forth.

Finally, family members are encouraged to get back to normal living, resume some of their activities, realize that life goes on, and people continue to develop. It takes a long while to get used to the idea that you have a loved one, a child, for example, that you brought into the world that has a very common, but severe disability; and that you realize that life goes on. And that there's a quality of life, and that employment is one of the goals and one of the strategies to achieve a quality of life where your loved one is able to have an income and affordable housing, and even a date on Saturday night.

Providers as Partners in Employment

—Teamwork

Hugh Bradshaw, from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in Vermont, suggested that Creative Workforce Solutions Employment Teams was a notion of coordinated points of contact vs. a single point of contact for business engagement, where all conversations with that business had to go through one person. Rather, it was more around coordination, and that everyone's a job developer.

The teams always start with success stories that set the table for the conversation, and it's a great way to recognize people's good work out in the community. Then there is a section on leads and needs. Some of the lessons learned is that you have to clearly define the purpose for the group. There needs to be a focus on providing quality services to employers, because at the end of the day, that's what this is all about.

Some advantages of employment teams:

Warm handoffs are really helpful. So if you have a good relationship with an employer, and you introduce somebody else on the team to that employer, that's much easier and a much better way to engage with that business than having to do another cold call.

If you don't have anybody on your caseload that was a match for that business, you need to find a way to share that with other folks, and teams have become a way to do that. Ultimately, the employer really doesn't care what program a great employee came from. As a team member, it's all about helping each other—helping each person's candidates have a success. That becomes a win for everyone on the team.

When building relationships with businesses, it takes time, so go slowly to build it over time. The same point applies about team members on one of these employment teams. Some of the ways to build a team are shared projects, shared job fairs, and things that could be done together, which helps build the team over time.

It is important to be very consistent in your services to businesses, where the team comes to an agreement about working with employers, such as timely follow-ups and regular check-ins with businesses. There needs to be a backup contact that you've identified ahead of time to your employers and how to get ahold of him or her, if needed. Businesses are much more willing to work with you if they know for sure they can pick up the phone and have somebody answer their concerns or deal with something that may be going on in the workplace right away.

The Vermont Progressive Employment Model is an employment strategy that provides individuals who have little or no work history, low skill levels, corrections involvement, or other barriers a way into paid employment that builds momentum and provides a means to increase skill level and confidence. Progressive employment is actually a continuum of engagement, options for businesses to meet candidates. It could be something as simple as an informational interview, where an individual can meet with an employer and learn more about that business and asks some questions. It could be a mock interview, where they actually run through what would replicate a real interview. Or it could be job shadowing, where they can watch people doing the job and not necessarily put their hands on it, but they're able to observe. Work experiences are probably the most prevalent of the activities. This is where somebody is actually in a workplace, usually about 20 hours a week or less for four to six weeks; and they're a trainee, but the difference is rather than sending them to a trade school, they're being trained by the employer in the workplace. So this progressive employment model is offered to employees, and it's been very well received by the employers as well.

Progressive employment seems like a wonderful consumer-choice model because it allows someone to explore various career options without actually making any kind of a commitment. And oftentimes during these work experiences, there's work being done on reducing barriers, accommodations, and figuring out other sort of key pieces, including transportation, childcare coverage, and things like that. So it's a great way for everyone to figure it all out before the business actually hires someone.

When we pull together and we join forces, our voice in the community is much louder. With a bigger group of over 20 organizations, there is a wide pool of candidates to choose from. Similarly, there can be larger conversations around transportation, retention, and services for individuals in workplaces. A powerful piece of these coalitions is the fact that rather than a single voice trying to be heard, our voice is being heard as a

small community rehab program, which has much more power when expressing concerns and considerations to employers as a group.

—Collaboration

Stephanie Marks, is the Director of Employment Collaboratives from Riverside Community Care in Massachusetts. Their Employment Collaborative mission is to increase job opportunities for individuals with disabilities and to promote cooperation over competition amongst community-based organizations that directly service individuals who are work ready.

There are some very important staff roles in the collaborative model. The business account manager is the person who meets with employers representing everybody. For example, in central Massachusetts, if there are 25 agencies that have individuals across all disabilities, the business account manager will meet with an employer on behalf of everybody.

The business account manager also provides a lot of consultation to job developers at community-based organizations, and in Massachusetts, there's tremendous turnover of employment specialists and job developers. The coordinator/business account manager does a lot of training of those individuals, and they also follow the Labor trends, develop training programs, etc. Generally, business account managers do not provide direct services to individuals, but they do provide a lot of technical assistance to folks.

The job developer's role, as they do direct service, come to a job developer networking meeting, and they find out all about the labor market trends: Who's hiring? Where are the jobs? What has the business account manager found in terms of who is hiring or training workers? What's going on in the regional labor market? What businesses are moving in or leaving an area? The job developers come to these regular meetings and find out about hundreds of different job openings. The job developers are encouraged to develop and maintain their own employer relationships on a local level, but share jobs they are unable to fill. Web-based systems and various technology platforms can be used to communicate with hundreds of job developers statewide.

Collaboration is very effective and has resulted in the placement of thousands of individuals with disabilities into jobs. Why collaborate? A true collaborator is going to not just help themselves, but help others, so why not collaborate? Bountiful job leads from everybody working together leads to more help for people in need. Also, because of staff turnover, it's important that people get information on how to write a resume,

how to do online applications, how to get ready for interviews, or how to write a resume with someone who had two years that doesn't account for any employment. So by collaborating, folks are learning from their peers.

Employers are brought in to talk about what they're looking for; and as a result there's a lot of training going on, such as mock interviewing and how to fill out the online applications. There are tours of companies so that the job developers and people that they serve can see the environment. For example, what does it really mean to work in a hospital setting, or what does it really mean to work at a CVS Pharmacy? [Basecamp](#), is an online communication tool, where everything is kept online, if somebody misses a training,

—Coalitions

David Smith is from Seacoast Mental Health Center in New Hampshire. With a workforce development coalition, shared leadership and facilitation is important, which means coordinating events, reminding people what is actually happening on the given day, taking notes, and getting those notes out. By bringing all these like-minded people to the table, they bring their expertise in different disability areas and resource connections.

There needs to be a trust level in working together, feeling confident that the person across the table is going to handle themselves in a professional manner with that employer, and is not going to look just for placing people, but making the right match for that person. The idea is to provide qualified candidates to employers, and a professional agreement helps everyone to understand each other's roles. When working together as a coalition, there's a lot of energy, there's a lot of activity, and there's a lot of problem solving.

Coalitions provide a great opportunity to market the value of hiring people with disabilities. Currently, the unemployment rate is so low all around us that it's not as big of a challenge as it used to be. Employers are calling saying, "I need some more people." But we know that won't always be the case. So now is the time to connect with as many employers as possible. One of the things that's great for somebody who's kind of new at this job as an employment specialist or job developer, is to be able to go to an employer and say, "Hi, I'm part of this larger group, and we are here to help you with your hiring needs." And then follow up either as an organization or as part of the coalition, which really makes employers feel more comfortable.

Presenting at Rotary chamber meetings, Chamber of Commerce meetings, corporate trainings, job fairs, and trade shows gets the word out. At other times when presenting, sometimes it's for the purpose of dispelling myths.

In coalitions, sharing those leads with others is very helpful. There is the powerful strategy of "I don't have the answer, but I can find it." And to know that your colleague will follow up right away with that employer and provide the needed information.

If you have a coalition that is running, it is so important to keep it going because it doesn't take very long for it to start to fall apart. And sometimes the key players on your coalition leave, move onto other jobs, move out of state, or somewhere else.

In conclusion, it is clear from each of the contributors that collaboration is needed between all parties involved in helping a person choose, get, and keep employment. Employers, family members, and providers need to work together as true partners in employment.

This newsletter is based on three 1-hour interactive webinars produced by Boston University's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation that focused on Partners in Employment with Employers, Families, and Providers, which featured the contributors in this newsletter.

<https://cpr.bu.edu/resources/partners-in-employment-webinars/>

Resources

- Basecamp Project Management, <https://basecamp.com/>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), <https://www.nami.org/>
- NAMI Family-to-Family Education Program, <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI-Programs/NAMI-Family-to-Family>
- U.S. Business Leadership Network, www.usbln.org
- Zoho CRM software, <https://www.zoho.com/>

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