

APSE Notes

Establishing a national Employment First agenda

Bob Niemiec^{a,*}, Don Lavin^b and Laura A. Owens^c

^a*Griffin-Hammis Associates, Saint Paul, MN, USA*

^b*Rise Incorporated, Spring Lake Park, MN, USA*

^c*APSE, Rockville, MD, USA*

Abstract. In order to advance the growing national momentum to focus on integrated employment as the desired outcome for citizens with disabilities, the Board of Directors of APSE recently established a strategic objective to support and promote the Employment First movement throughout the United States. The purpose of this paper is to identify the fundamental principles of an effective state or local initiative. The principles identified in this paper are built upon practical experiences and track records of several Employment First projects operating successfully around the country.

Keywords: Employment First, individuals with disabilities

1. Background

Citizens with disabilities in the labor force have a positive financial impact on our economy, generating income that is ultimately returned in the form of tax revenues and purchase of goods and services. Despite this knowledge, citizens with disabilities continue to have the highest unemployment rates of any minority group in our country. One of the greatest civil rights leaders of all time and author of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Honorable Tony Coelho, stated, “A lot of people focus on our disability and ignore our ability, and all we want is the right to be fired, because if you give us the right to be fired, then you have to give us the right to be hired.” Citizens with disabilities do not necessarily want to be fired, but they do want to be treated equally in the labor force.

In recent years, there has been a growing grass roots movement to establish Employment First initiatives

in the United States (Tennessee, 2002; Washington, 2004; California, 2005; Indiana, 2005; Minnesota, 2006; Georgia, North Dakota, Wisconsin & Missouri in progress). Many of these states have worked with their state APSE chapter to secure input from all stakeholders.

In his final week as Assistant Secretary for the Department of Labor’s Office on Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Neil Romano issued a memorandum highlighting the importance of the nation’s Employment First movement. According to the former Assistant Secretary, “Several states have moved forward to implement policies that focus on integrated, community-based employment earning at or above the minimum wage as the first option for individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Using these ‘employment first’ policies, states are tapping the skills and contributions of these individuals to match employer demand for a reliable, productive workforce through customized employment opportunities. In these employment first states, sheltered employment with sub-minimum wages and non-work ‘day activities’ are no longer acceptable employment outcomes” (ODEP Memorandum, January 15, 2009).

*Address for correspondence: Bob Niemiec, Senior Consultant, Griffin-Hammis Associates, LLC, 1923 Cottage Avenue East, St. Paul, MN 55119, USA. Tel.: +1 651 334 0235; E-mail: bniemiec@griffinhammis.com.

Most of the employment first initiatives the former Assistant Secretary referred to are being led by local state APSE chapters or other entities with the active participation of state APSE chapter leaders and members. A recent report shared by APSE state chapter presidents revealed that 12 states were already actively involved in Employment First initiatives or considering the launch of local efforts focusing on Employment First within their state. Also, many state APSE chapters are asking for guidance to assist in the development of local Employment First coalitions and partnerships throughout the United States.

2. Establishing Employment First initiatives

Although no universal definition of “employment first” exists, the policies, practices and strategies focus on integrated, community-based employment as the desired outcome for individuals with disabilities. Employment First strategies generally consist of a clear set of guiding principles, policies and practices disseminated through state statute, regulation or operational procedures that identify employment in integrated, community-based businesses as the priority for state funding. A number of state initiatives have taken steps to clarify what employment first means. In Minnesota, for example, employment first means “*expecting, encouraging, providing, creating, and rewarding integrated employment in the workforce as the first and preferred option of youth and adults with disabilities*”. (Minnesota’s Employment First Manifesto, 2007.)

Employment First initiatives highlight the need to raise expectations and implement better practices around employment for individuals with disabilities. To that end, many state initiatives have taken additional steps to define what “employment” means to ensure the goal of integrated jobs in the workforce at competitive wages and benefits. While Employment First initiatives utilized supported employment and customized employment strategies, employment is not defined using these terms. Employment First initiatives center on holding individuals with disabilities to the same employment standards, responsibilities, and sets of expectations as any working-age adult.

3. Recommendations for implementing Employment First

Employment First is about raising expectations. The real engine of social change is not money but rather expectations. Of course, we need adequate public

resources to obtain high quality education and integrated employment outcomes. However, without higher expectations, individuals with disabilities and their families often settle for programs or services that do not encourage them to participate fully in the mainstream of community life. This is confirmed by the fact that a majority of working age adults with significant disabilities are supported today in programs that offer segregation and long-term dependency regardless of the cost.

How can Employment First initiatives increase the demand for integrated employment? This objective can be accomplished through better public education and policy advocacy. Individuals with disabilities and their families must be made more aware of the exciting integrated employment opportunities available to them. It is particularly instructive to share employment success stories of others to create hope, stimulate imagination, and increase expectations of all stakeholders. When individuals with disabilities and their families recognize the clear benefits, their expectations will change and they will choose work!

4. Build a “Coalition of the Willing”

Collaborate with multiple stakeholders (i.e., individuals with disabilities, business, rehabilitation agencies, state agencies, disability organizations, families). While it is difficult to get everyone on board, this should not become a barrier to your local efforts. It is far more important to have “doers” on the team than representatives from influential organizations who do not contribute solutions to move Employment First forward. In building a strong coalition, start with people who have the interest, passion, time, and energy to work on the real issues. Intentionally leave any naysayers standing on the outside because you cannot afford the distractions or negative energy.

4.1. Make sure the “Employment First” bus leaves the station

In his landmark book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins uses a recurring metaphor of a bus. He talks about getting the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus as a key to the greatness of an organization. We like to apply the bus metaphor to the Employment First movement. It is critical to get the right people on the bus – but who are the right people? The answer is simple. The right people are those people who believe *everybody means everybody*. The right people believe

employment should be the *first and preferred option for all working-age adults* (and students who will soon be adults). The right people may not have all the answers, but are undaunted in their pursuit of making employment the first choice. The right people believe their pursuits will yield better answers than currently exist. The right people are committed to action and not afraid of a little hard work. Anyone can get on the employment first bus, as long their ticket is punched with these fundamental characteristics.

4.2. *Build on communities*

Think globally, but act locally. Successful initiatives work to establish “Community Action Teams” with goals of advancing an Employment First vision. This would logically include local coalitions of federal, state and local organizations as well as individuals who are willing to work together to get things done in a targeted geographic area. It is important to create Community Action Teams that can organize their work plans around the unique situations that exist in a particular community. The teams should be comprised of business leaders, job seekers, educators, family and disability advocates, employment providers, workforce development professionals, county representatives, vocational rehabilitation professionals, and other interested community members. The “ticket” to belonging to a successful Community Action Team is a commitment to action. The team’s overall performance will be gauged by the implementation of better practices and measurable increases in integrated employment for individuals with disabilities.

4.3. *The Business Community*

Business represents the “demand side” of the employment equation. The task of Employment First initiatives is to connect the demand side with the supply side (available workers). There is a growing body of evidence that hiring Americans with disabilities is just good business. Studies have demonstrated that workers with disabilities are loyal employees who bring necessary talents and skills into the workforce. Despite stereotypes about disability, there is no evidence that employees with disabilities are unsafe or less effective on the job than employees who do not have disabilities. Further, the American public has expressed strong support of businesses that choose to hire job seekers with disabilities. In fact, one national study indicated 87% of the American public would prefer to give their business

to companies who do so (Siperstein, Romano, Mohler and Parker, 2001).

Employment First initiatives need business leaders to champion their cause and carry the message forward. There are many thousands of satisfied employers in the United States who have practical experience as well as expertise in hiring and integrating workers with disabilities. Many can speak about their employees who have disabilities with direct authority and knowledge about their business contributions. In America, we do not need a charitable marketing campaign. We need a national business dialogue about employees with disabilities as economic assets. This not only means hiring *qualified* job applicants but also hiring *quality* workers who can perform essential job tasks customized to fit their identified strengths.

4.4. *The School Community*

One of best ways for Employment First initiatives to shape the future is to engage effective partnerships with secondary and post-secondary education institutions. Significant changes in policies and procedures must begin with changes in school systems so an Employment First vision is firmly rooted in the blueprint for the future. Practically speaking, this means redesigning service policies and practices so transition-aged youth and young adults are guided directly to post-secondary education options or integrated employment in the community workforce.

The educational system needs to modify its investment in the training of teachers and others involved with special education, vocational training, vocational rehabilitation, business, and management. Employment First initiatives need to work with education to refocus the expectations of educators who work directly with students with disabilities. This means redesigning educational curricula with core principles of Employment First policies and 21st Century Skills (<http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/>) in addition to utilizing supported and customized employment practices.

Degree programs preparing teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and business leaders of the future must include dedicated courses on universal design and differentiated instruction so that workers with complex disabilities are employed as a regularly occurring part of the community workforce. Vocational rehabilitation counselor training must take extra care to assure that graduates exit their programs prepared to develop Individual Plans for Employment (IPEs) that

are based on the unique needs, interests and situations of the individuals with whom they serve.

Finally, schools and adult service systems need to work together to eliminate “employment readiness” service designs. After all, what young adult is truly “ready” for what lies ahead of them in the adult world?

5. Clarify “employment” and “Employment First”

Establish a clear and uncompromising definition of “employment”. For most Employment First initiatives, this means a focus on real jobs, real wages, and real business settings. It also means the launch of self-employment and micro-enterprises. It is critical for everyone to be working from the same set of assumptions. Stay focused on this one, simple concept. If you can maintain a singular focus on a simple idea, your initiative will not be lured into distracting arguments. Employment First is all about *fundamental rights*. Who can be against people with disabilities having an equal opportunity to get a good job, use their talents and skills, earn competitive wages, increase their self-support, and contribute to the prosperity of their communities?

5.1. Distinguish between “qualified” and “quality” employees

A common rejection tactic by unenlightened rehabilitation providers and employers is to focus only on job qualifications. Yet, in some job recruitment situations, qualifications may be secondary to the “qualities” an employee may bring to a business. Once again, negotiating jobs based on identified strengths changes the job development landscape and can offer a new perspective concerning the qualities of a person seeking the job. Stated simply, strengths-based employment changes what it means to be “qualified” because all jobs and tasks are negotiated with employers (customized) and built to fit the interests and strengths of a job seeker (supported).

6. Emphasize real systems change policies

Our country spends millions of dollars on secondary education, adult community services, Social Security disability benefits, transportation, and comprehensive health care of Americans with disabilities. Unfortunately, many of these resources do not encourage

or reward integrated, community-based employment. Resolving our national unemployment problem will require a shift in policies and “rebalancing” of many existing resources.

The most successful initiatives, therefore, recognize that the core charge is to thoughtfully and methodically address policies that encourage and support integrated employment outcomes. This vision for change needs to be reflected in all appropriate public policies impacting education as well as adult health, disability, and human services. To the extent possible, public policies need to be unmistakably clear about expectations as well as provide for flexibility to rebalance existing resources. Of course, this means moving aggressively to develop new policies, amend existing ones, and reallocate funding to promote an employment first approach.

6.1. Everybody means everybody

No one wants to erect disability service “silos”, but be wary of designing a workforce system that is too generic and fails to deliver critical job-related supports. Although we would love to see individuals with disabilities employed using the same methods and processes as everyone else, individuals with more significant disabilities are universally overlooked. There are many initiatives throughout the country aimed at the employment of individuals with disabilities, but when push comes to shove, individuals with more significant disabilities are either pushed to the end of the line or shoved out of the line altogether. This may seem like a contradiction, but we have learned that negotiation practices and strengths-based approaches are essential tools in the integrated employment of individuals with disabilities – especially for those with complex lives and situations. Virtually all individuals with disabilities have important qualities and talents to contribute to business – and they can work successfully with the right type of job support.

6.2. Focus on the positives

The most successful alliances focus on what they are for – not what they are against. This is an example of taking the high road. When local initiatives remain focused on the one, simple idea, and stay true to “everybody means everybody”, arguments are neutralized. In sum, the most successful alliances work hard to build momentum that others want to join.

Employment First initiatives tend to lose a lot of people as well as opportunities when they go negative

and fail to recognize local strengths. Make the effort to showcase those parts of the system that actually promote and encourage an Employment First agenda. Celebrating the positives and rewarding great work, supplies a boost of energy, offers hope, and builds new alliances needed later to tackle the most stubborn obstacles and barriers.

6.3. Invest in community support systems that promote employability

One shallow criticism of the Employment First movement is this notion of engaging a one-dimensional strategy to the exclusion of others. Most proponents of an employment first vision recognize the importance of holistic planning and integrating critical collateral services to support the job placement and self-dependency goals of youth and adults with disabilities.

To illustrate, the best laid employment plans will never be successfully launched without reliable access to public or privately supported transportation for some individuals. Similarly, many adults with serious mental illnesses will not succeed in competitive employment without access to effective, responsive mental health treatment. Many job seekers who are deaf or hard of hearing cannot function successfully in their job search without access to American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters or Occupational Communication Specialists. Some adults with intellectual disabilities living in community residential services might require flexible, responsive staff support to accommodate their work schedules. Finally, young adults in secondary education programs often need access to a wide array of services within school as well as from the adult service system to successfully transition from school to career.

To say it simply, job placement success is the product of identifying and removing multiple, complex systems barriers. This means considering the whole person and providing an essential array of community supports to ensure integrated employment is a viable option.

7. Focus on strengths based practices

Present education and rehabilitation service systems are invested in programs designed to correct problems related to the presence of disabilities. Even the lexicon associated with the delivery of special education and adult disability services communicates the wrong message. There is an underlying communication that people with disabilities are “special” or “damaged” in

some way and need to be “rehabilitated” so they can join the workforce like the rest of us. This is an archaic way of thinking and communicating about the job potential of individuals.

Employment First initiatives work to rebrand the work we do through moving toward an educational and workforce system that identifies, markets, and employs assets and strengths one person at a time. Emerging practices in customized and supported employment offer exciting possibilities to change the present system of education and workforce development services. Many individuals with disabilities, especially those with significant disabilities, do not need rehabilitation but rather customized job supports to choose, get, and keep integrated employment.

7.1. Invest in new technologies and training in customized and supported employment practices

Local alliances must work to identify service practices, technologies, resources, and expertise that will lead to a better return on investment (ROI). There is ample national research to document specific practices that are more effective in producing integrated employment and wage outcomes for youth and adults with disabilities. If there is a “buy in” that integrated employment and competitive wages ought to be a local priority, then Community Action Teams need to invest ample resources in broad staff development training initiatives so educators and adult service professionals are better prepared to assume new roles.

For many, such proposed changes in philosophy and practices will be viewed as a threat. Regardless of the resistance, these changes must be pursued. If an employment first initiative intends to promote a direction to business consultation roles, then local professionals need to be equipped with new skill sets. This means launching training and technical assistance programs to promote competencies consistent with the new vision. This changed emphasis will better support community businesses in building new capacities to recruit, hire, train, supervise, and integrate employees with disabilities within their respective labor force.

7.2. Employment First movement is not a one-time event

Most of us have been through a lot of initiatives that have lost their steam and failed to deliver on the promise of integrated employment for all individu-

als with disabilities. The most successful Employment First coalitions work to keep the momentum going and realize that real change means pacing themselves to run the proverbial marathon. Working to achieve real systems change takes time and the pace will be determined by the size and scope of the identified goals. The most successful initiatives have established a strategic vision with clear goals for changing policies, practices, and outcomes. Despite their measured gains, they work to widen their circle of Employment First champions by including self-advocates, family members, business leaders, educators, policymakers, employment providers, and others to share in the division of labor. It is not only important to get everyone on the bus, but to also make sure people are “sitting in the right seats” in order to reach our destination more efficiently and effectively.

7.3. *Sustaining momentum is critical*

Employment First initiatives must continue to make slow and steady progress. As stated, this type of system change is more like a marathon than a sprint. It takes perseverance and dedication to reach the finish line. Incremental victories are critical, but it is more important to believe you will make lasting and pervasive changes in the long run. It is essential to keep your eye on the prize.

7.4. *Communicate, communicate, and communicate some more*

Most Employment First initiatives have identified a strong need for ongoing connectivity to sustain the energy and synergy of its members and collaborators. Maintaining effective communication with your allies and keeping the dialogue strong with the general public is essential. Being “persistently present” is an important tool to keeping the attention focused on the right things. Successful Employment First initiatives plan ways to involve themselves in many conversations and in many places and venues.

8. **Measure and evaluate progress**

In Minnesota, an Employment First Manifesto (2007) served as the testament of MN Employment First Coalition’s intent to act on its beliefs. Other states such

as Indiana have produced Employment First reports. It is important to produce tangible evidence of goals and actions to come, whether a report, a CD or a website. When you can put something into someone’s hands, it becomes real. And, of course, there is the old adage – “What gets measured, gets done”. The development and distribution of a coalition’s “products” gives a clearer picture of your goals and establishes performance accountability to your constituents and stakeholders.

8.1. *Whatever it takes*

There is no “cookie cutter” approach to implementing an Employment First strategy in any state. Although there is much to be learned from experienced, successful initiatives, each alliance must address systems policy and funding barriers in its own backyard. Transforming a network of education, disability, workforce development, business, and human service systems is challenging and very complex work. Needless to say, state coalitions and local Community Action Teams will need buy-in from key stakeholders to plan and implement multi-dimensional organization and systems change strategies. This will likely include, but is not limited to, new or enhanced policies, public education, rebalancing of public resources, retooling job roles for educators and disability support professionals, staff development training, transforming organizations and their administrative infrastructures, business marketing and development, peer mentoring strategies, and infusing promising practices such as customized and supported employment.

Finally, National APSE and its state chapters can play an effective role in making good things happen. APSE is uniquely positioned to take the lead in advancing an Employment First agenda throughout the country. APSE’s long standing mission of promoting integrated, community-based employment for individuals with the most significant disabilities allows the organization and its chapters to stay focused on the one, simple thing – integrated employment.

The APSE organization can lead and help shape the transformation of state and local support systems to promote and encourage integrated employment as the first choice of youth and adults with disabilities. There has never been a better time than now and no organization is better poised than APSE to take up this national challenge.