



Q & A:

Collaboration and Funding as Tools to Promote a Job-Seeker Responsive Employment Process

Question # 1: What is meant by the term “job seeker-responsive employment process”?

Answer: Youth with significant disabilities seeking employment services frequently utilize a variety of community resources, including but not limited to State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies and Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs). Transition-age youth can also seek employment support through secondary education services. Too often, individuals with significant disabilities have limited opportunity to explore their preferences related to employment. The job seeker-responsive employment process enhances a youth or young adult’s opportunities to achieve competitive integrated competitive employment by focusing on their strengths and interests. This process involves five key steps:

1. Building awareness about the variety of employment possibilities that match the job seeker’s interests.
2. Exploring work settings of potential interest through exposure to a variety of businesses.
3. Gaining first-hand information about specific areas of interest by trying out different jobs.
4. Setting a job goal and securing employment in a job that matches the job seeker’s skills and interests.
5. Providing job accommodations when necessary for employment success.
6. Providing extended employment support services to maintain job stability when needed.

Traditionally, employment plans for individuals experiencing more significant disabilities focused frequently on entry-level jobs in a limited occupational range, predominantly involving the service industry. Often, these jobs were “forced choice” situations where the individual has little other options if they want to receive employment services. The planned employment outcome was not based on the individual having the opportunity to explore potential interests through visits to a variety of job sites.

Today, employment services are focusing more on a job seeker-responsive employment process that emphasizes job matches involving the collaborative support of funding agencies and the full participation of the job seeker. These job matches can include negotiated arrangements with employers that meet the needs of the job seeker and the employer. A primary example that sets up a collaborative job seeker-responsive employment process is found in the provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act of 2014 (WIOA). WIOA provides funding to state VR agencies and has specific provisions that expand employment services for youth with disabilities. These provisions address pre-employment, job placement, and extended employment supports. WIOA requires the following of VR:

- Reserve 15% of federal VR funds to provide pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to assist youth with disabilities in transitioning from secondary school to employment.
- Reserve and expend 5% of their federal supported employment allotment for the provision of supported employment for youth with the most significant disabilities to achieve an employment outcome.
- Provide extended employment services for youth with the most significant disabilities for up to 4 years.

In practice, Pre-ETS services for youth can take on many different forms across a variety of organizations and agencies. Consider the implementation of work-based learning experiences: One CRP may be able to provide a large variety of work experiences. The CRP can use Pre-ETS funding to provide a range of work-based learning that includes less intensive experiences (e.g., visits to business settings and job shadowing experiences) in addition to more intensive services such as internships that involve 120 hours over an 8-week period and after school part-time paid employment experiences.

Question # 2: How can collaborative planning and funding approaches encourage job seeker-responsive employment services and thereby prevent job seekers with significant disabilities from ending up in subminimum wage positions or moved to a waiting list?

Answer: Let's consider a service planning and funding approach that utilizes a collaborative process among stakeholders to facilitate job seeker-responsive services. For example, an employment support team is formed that includes the job seeker, an employment specialist from a CRP, representation from VR and a disability-specific agency, a public-school representative, and key family and friends chosen by the job seeker. Advances in technology and group communication options such as Zoom provide the opportunity where actual physical presence in one setting by all participants is not necessary. The team collaborates on how to best match funds and other resources to provide the needed services. This team explores, under the job seeker's full participation, how best to determine possible job interests and needed supports. Together, they map out an employment plan. The critical measure of the responsiveness of this plan is the satisfaction of the job seeker. This example clearly illustrates a collaborative process identifying the funding and supports needed to give the job seeker the best opportunity for a satisfactory employment outcome by:

- Organizing the participation of support team representatives to proactively match resources to a personalized employment plan.
- Matching funding to a targeted employment outcome specifically chosen by the job seeker.
- Considering a variety of employment and support options including supported employment, customized employment, and self-employment.

Question # 3: What are some of the constraints in funding arrangements that can work against achieving customer-responsive employment services and outcomes?

Answer: There are a number of constraints that limit the flexibility to provide individualized supports, which ultimately restricts employment outcomes. Five of these are:

- Inadequacies and inequities in payment rates across service options
- Limits on activities prior to securing employment
- Funding that is non-responsive to individual support needs
- Funding that is non-responsive to career interests
- Time limits on how long a service can be provided

Funding inequities occur when the rates paid by the funder for certain employment services do not cover the cost to the CRP to provide the needed services. Funding policies can set limits on pre-employment activities, such as an in-depth effort to explore and discover personal employment goals and to develop job opportunities responsive to those goals. These limits will restrict the job seekers choice and ultimately self-determination in establishing a job goal. In addition, funding mechanisms that fail to take into consideration the level of support each individual needs to be successful in employment will limit access to employment services for individuals with more significant disabilities.

Funding policies can impact the ability of an employment service provider to be proactive in meeting the job and career interests of a recipient of employment services. For example, setting a specific time limit on payment authorizations based on hours or days of service instead of the point where the service recipient achieves job stability can severely limit the opportunity for sustained employment success. Funding approaches that fail to take into consideration ongoing support needs after job stability may unnecessarily threaten job retention and limit career advancement.

Question #4: What are the characteristics of a job seeker-responsive funding approach to achieving successful competitive integrated employment outcomes?

Answer: Funding approaches that support job seeker-directed funding employment outcomes have a number of shared characteristics:

- Expanding access to services
- Ensuring customers are in control of funds
- Placing individual job seekers with significant disabilities in control of the selection of providers
- Removing funding barriers.

The first indicator of job seeker-responsive funding is that an individual with a significant disability has reasonable access to services. Funding policies that are not committed to funding the level of services needed for success is an example of a design that results in denial of access. This can include under-funding the support program for an individual. Access to services can also be limited by provider agencies that refuse to take referrals because of concerns that adequate funding is not available to cover the costs of providing services.

The funding of people, not programs, is the second core indicator of job seeker-responsive funding. For example, the program has taken precedence over the individual when he or she seeks competitive integrated employment and is told that those services are not available. This stands in contrast to a job seeker-directed responsive approach that turns over control of funding allocations to the recipient of services. A typical way that the individual receiving services can direct funding is by having the job seeker satisfaction signoff as a part of any major funding decision and service outcome. This can be expressed at the point of employment when changes are made in the level and type of employment related supports. The job also must be consistent with the employment goal stated by the individual.

The authority to select providers is the third indicator of the job seeker-directed funding system. Job seekers must have informed choice regarding the strengths and potential weaknesses of a variety of provider agencies potentially available in their communities. Information needs to be provided on the various outcomes achieved by provider agencies. This information could include the wages and benefits acquired, as well as the types of jobs found. This information allows the job seeker to get answers to the following key questions:

- Does the employment support agency focus more on service oriented, high-turnover type positions or is there a spread of positions across a variety of employment situations with indications of career potential?
- What is the job retention of employees with significant disabilities who have been served through this particular provider?
- What is the disability profile of individuals who receive services?

Information should be available from the funding agencies and/or community programs to

answer each of these questions. The job seeker should be encouraged to ask these questions before committing to a program.

Finally, funding collaborators recognize the demands and limits facing each funding partner and work together to limit barriers that interfere with access to needed services and supports. A funding arrangement that sets very specific limits on the amount and/or type of services is a barrier. For example, putting a limit on ongoing support funding to 4 hours of service per month can be problematic. If ongoing support funding is limited, job stability or retention may be threatened for the individual whose job assignment or supervisor changes, since a short period of more intense support might be needed. Job seeker-responsive funding collaborations prioritize limiting this type of barrier.

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