

# Improving Supervisor Evaluations Through the Use of Self-Determination Contracts

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**Abstract.** Supervisor perceptions of employee competence in areas of work, social, and personal demands of the job often determine success or failure for the supported employee. This study involved three workers with disabilities who participated in a supported employment program. After being successfully hired in a job of their choosing, problems arose that jeopardized the successful completion of the placement phase. The workers used individualized self-determination contracts to improve supervisor evaluations. Specifically, they completed daily self-determination contracts to plan their work outcomes, manage their tasks, evaluate their performance, and make adjustments for their next opportunity to work. Results indicated that all three workers used self-determination strategies to improve their performance and meet the expectations of their respective employers.

Supported employment refers to paid work at or above minimum wage, in an integrated work setting, for individuals who need ongoing support to perform in a work setting. The Developmental Disabilities Act of 1984 (PL 98-527) officially defined the term supported employment to ensure that persons with developmental disabilities achieve their maximum potential through increased independence, productivity, and integration into the community. Thus, employment in community jobs with support is a basic assumption underlying supported employment (Brooke, Wehman, Inge, & Parent, 1995). Before the concept of supported employment emerged, vocational rehabilitation and educational programs trained people in sheltered workshops to “get ready” for community employment. Unfortunately, these programs transitioned very few people into community jobs. As a result, service providers, parents, and policymakers began to think that a different approach was needed to enable individuals to become gainfully employed (Bellamy, Rhodes, Mank, & Albin, 1988; Whitehead, 1979).

Innovative research found that individuals with mental retardation could learn complex job skills (Bellamy, Horner, & Inman, 1979; Gold, 1972; Mithaug, 1972). Demonstration projects followed showing that individuals with mental retardation could obtain and maintain community jobs (Rusch, Connis,

& Sowers, 1978; Rusch & Mithaug, 1980; Wehman, 1981).

Supported employment evolved in three ideological phases. In the first phase, the employment specialist made all placement decisions regarding employment for clients. Rusch and Mithaug's (1980) train-and-place model exemplifies this phase. Martin, Mithaug, Oliphint, Husch, and Frazier (2002) describe this phase as "Get a Job-Any Job-and Keep the Individual at the Job." Employment specialists in this phase established relationships with area employers who had job openings in positions "within the capacity" of potential workers (Wehman & Kregel, 1985). The employment specialist assessed the job requirements and the potential worker's skills in those areas, secured the job, and taught the worker any needed vocational or social skills. A potential worker then tried to meet the demands of the existing job. Once placed, the employment specialists addressed on-the-job work-related problems (e.g., productivity, accuracy, on-task), social problems (e.g., talk too much, too little), and personal problems (e.g., hygiene, appearance).

The second phase, "Get a Job That Is a Match for the Individual" (Martin et al., 2002), provided a structure whereby employment specialists consider what they think the potential worker might like to do, but excludes the individual from direct decision-making. Employment specialist perceptions of preferred job characteristics, skills, preferences, and needs determine a vocational profile, which is used to make employment decisions (Beyer & Kilsby, 1997; McLoughlin, Garner, & Callahan, 1987). The potential worker's work preferences contribute to making a job match, but in the end the employment specialist still makes the final decisions about the appropriateness of various jobs (Martin et al., 2002).

The third phase, or the self-directed employment phase, structured the employment process so that individuals with disabilities make job choice decisions. In this phase "the individual with a disability must be the one to select a career path after experiencing a variety of vocational experiences and supports" (Martin et al., 2002, p. 5).

Self-determination practices drive the third phase. Self-determination is a basic human right (Mithaug, 1993; Nirje, 1972). A self-determined person controls his own life and destiny (Wehmeyer, 1998). A self-determined person knows himself, values himself, has plans to achieve desired outcomes, acts on those plans, experiences outcomes (desired or otherwise) and learns from them, making adjustments for next time (Field & Hoffman, 1994). Further, a self-determined person knows his personal needs, and makes choices based on those needs (Martin & Mithaug, 1990). Martin and Marshall (1995) maintain that:

Self-determined people know how to choose—they know what they want and how to get it. From an awareness of personal needs, self-determined individuals choose goals, then doggedly pursue them. This involves asserting an individual's presence, making his or her needs known, evaluating

progress toward meeting goals, adjusting performance, and creating unique approaches to solve problems. (p. 147)

Historically, people with disabilities often have had choices made for them and about them. Self-determination practices empower individuals to make their own choices.

Self-determination, as it pertains to supported employment, “encompasses a range of approaches with the broad aim of enabling people with disabilities to play an active role in developing their careers” (Kilsby & Beyer, 2002, p. 125). For example, the Association of Persons in Supported Employment’s (APSE) *Ethical Guidelines for Professionals in Supported Employment* (Di Leo, McDonald, & Killam, 1996) mandate that opportunities be provided for individuals with disabilities to direct their own employment decisions and become involved in on-the-job problem solving.

Once on the job, workers may experience social, personal, or work problems that could interfere with job performance and continued employment. After workers learn what to do at a job site, the focus shifts to fluency, maintaining adequate productivity, and adjusting to changing job demands. Here honest and realistic supervisor feedback about workers’ social, personal, and work performance initiates a process whereby workers compare their performance to supervisory standards. If performance falls short of expectations, workers develop a plan to improve performance. To do this, workers learn how to use self-determination contracts (Martin et al., 2002).

Self-determination contracts evolved from early work on self-management strategies. For example, the Adaptability Instructional Model (Mithaug, Martin, & Agran, 1987) taught students with disabilities self-regulatory skills needed for school-to-work transitions including decision-making, independent performance, self-evaluation, and adjustment. The Adaptability Instructional Model evolved into the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction where success is determined not by simply adapting, but by actively changing existing circumstances to attain a more favorable outcome. This involves (a) setting a goal, (b) taking action, and (c) adjusting the goal or plan to attain the goal (Mithaug, Wehmeyer, Agran, Martin, & Palmer, 1998; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000).

Self-determination contracts and goal-attainment strategies have been used successfully in schools. German, Martin, Huber Marshall, and Sale (2003) used self-determination contracts found in the *Take Action: Making Goals Happen* (Huber Marshall et al., 1999) lesson package to teach students to attain their IEP goals. Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, and Martin (2000) used the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* to teach students to become causal agents in their own lives and increase their self-determination skills. Martin et al. (2003) used self-determination contracts to teach students self-regulation skills while completing academic tasks.

Several types of self-determination contracts may be used to facilitate on-the-job problem solving, including work and social improvement contracts by allowing workers the opportunity to self-regulate their behavior (Martin, Mithaug, Agran, & Husch, 1990). Specifically, self-determination contracts are designed to provoke engagement, engagement in turn impacts adjustments, and adjustments determine what changes individuals make (Martin et al., 2003). In this study, we examined the effects of self-determination contracts in a supported employment program to improve supervisor evaluations.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Mitch, a 32-year-old man, had suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) as a result of a heart attack and subsequent lack of oxygen to the brain. A mechanical engineer prior to the incident, he had great difficulty adjusting to his newfound cognitive and motor challenges. He wanted to work and interacted well with most everyone, but often resisted help and was often unwilling to admit that there might be a concern regarding job performance.

Ty, a 25-year-old man, had a primary diagnosis of TBI and a secondary diagnosis of specific learning disability (LD). Prior to a motorcycle accident that caused his brain injury, he worked as a machinist while going to college. Ty also had difficulty adjusting to the various challenges introduced by his injury. Post injury, Ty had academic skills comparable to those of a typical student in the fourth grade, could tell time, and drive a car. Ty's interactions with supervisors and peers were considered to be generally appropriate, but attitude problems sometimes surfaced. Lack of motivation and a desire to socialize inhibited his productivity.

Eric, an 18-year-old man, had a diagnosis of autistic disorder/savant syndrome. School testing records indicated superior verbal-spatial and visual-motor functioning compared to his verbal functioning. Eric had just graduated from high school and wanted to work. He eagerly attempted most tasks presented to him. Unfortunately, he was of the opinion that his performance on the task attempted was perfect and, therefore, was not receptive to constructive criticism that presented him with ways to improve his on-the-job performance skills. Some tasks simply did not interest him. When asked to do a task that he was not interested in, his response was, "No, I can't do it."

### *Settings*

Mitch chose a job at a factory through his association with a supported employment program. The factory supervisor at first requested minimal job coach support and wanted to do the initial training with natural supports.

Mitch was initially assigned the task of “catching” products off of a press and stacking them on a rack as part of an assembly line. The task involved manipulating the pieces so they fit together properly before putting them on the rack. Fitting the pieces together required intense concentration from Mitch. This slowed him down, and put the entire line off schedule. Visual-motor difficulties combined with a stressful, noisy work environment made this task a poor match for Mitch.

Mitch subsequently tried a job in the bagging area, which was quiet and where he could work at his own pace. He filled 15 cu. ft. bags with packing material, marked an inventory sheet, and stacked the bags in the appropriate area. Mitch tallied each bag after completion in the correct (regular or antistatic) column and wrote the weight in the weight column. His tally marks tended to wander about the page, and he often forgot to write down the weight. Mitch had worked for about a month when his supervisor requested additional support. While the move to the bagging area was a positive step for both Mitch and his supervisor, the quality of his performance did not meet his supervisor’s expectations. Mitch did not want a job coach working directly with him on site, but agreed to this arrangement when it was explained to him that his job was at stake.

Ty chose a job through his association with the supported employment program at a local machine shop working as a machinist’s helper. Tasks included measuring and cutting stock, grinding, de-burring, counting and packaging finished products for shipment, daily cleanup duties, and other duties assigned by the supervisor. Ty had been working for about two weeks when the supervisor became concerned about his productivity.

Eric chose a job through his association with the supported employment program at a local fast-food restaurant where he maintained the salad bar. Eric was very distractible and struggled with several of the requirements of the task. Of particular concern was his apparent inattentiveness when given instructions and failure to follow the instructions.




### *Design*

We used a replicated series of AB designs to demonstrate experimental control. This design is similar to the more traditional multiple-baseline design in that replication controls for threats to internal validity, but the subjects and settings had nothing in common, and the interventions took place at different points in time.

### *Dependent Measure, Data Collection, and Agreement*

The supervisor’s evaluation of “yes” or “no” on a daily evaluation card served as the dependent measure. Each worker’s supervisor completed a daily evaluation card (see Figure 1). The card addressed worker performance of job

Figure 1. Supervisor evaluation card.

Supervisor's Evaluation		
Name: _____		Date: _____
Category	Met Requirements?	Comments
 Work	Yes    No	
 Social	Yes    No	
 Personal	Yes    No	

requirements in the areas of work (actual tasks of the job), social (interactions with supervisors and peers), and personal (appearance, hygiene, etc.). To verify the accuracy of recording the yes or no responses from the cards to contracts to graphs, an independent observer determined that the researchers recorded 100% of Mitch's and Eric's data accurately. Because supervisor concerns primarily included job task performance and the workers consistently met the expectations for social and personal aspects of the job, Figure 5 shows only evaluations on the "work" portion of the supervisor evaluation card.

*Baseline*

During baseline, the three individuals performed their job tasks per normal working conditions. Baseline procedures included praise, error correction, and instruction. Each worker's supervisor taught the worker the basic job tasks with the help of the job coach. Supervisors and job coaches provided praise and error correction. Supervisors filled out evaluation cards at the end of each shift and indicated whether the worker met employer expectations. A stable baseline of at least three consecutive negative supervisor evaluations for the "work" portion of the evaluation card was established for each participant.

*Intervention*

Self-determination contracts addressed the individual needs of each worker and his supervisor's expectations. At the start of each workday, the worker filled out a contract by setting at least one goal to work on for the day. After setting the goal, the worker then devised a plan to achieve the goal, started his shift, and concentrated on achieving the stated goal. After his shift, the worker



Figure 3. Ty's job production sheet.

Job Production Sheet

Time	Boss told me what to do	Self-Instruction	Shop Std.	How many will I do?	Number produced	Total parts	Did I do what I said I would do?
7:00-8:00	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
8:00-9:00	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
9:00-10:00	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
10:00-11:00	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
11:00-12:00	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
12:30-1:30	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
1:30-2:30	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
2:30-3:30	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No
3:30-4:30	Yes No	Yes No					Yes No

Did I meet my production goals for 6 out of 8 time blocks?      Yes    No

Did I make my boss money today?      Yes    No

Tomorrow, in how many time blocks will I meet my hourly goal?    -----



RESULTS

After three days of “No” evaluations signifying that Mitch did not meet supervisor expectations for work, we introduced the self-determination contract package (see Figure 5). Mitch continued to receive “No” evaluations the first three days of intervention. On the fourth day of intervention, Mitch received a “Yes” evaluation from his supervisor. After eight consecutive days of positive evaluations, supervisor feedback cards were faded to once every three to five days. Maintenance probes were all positive. Mitch’s percentage of workdays with “Yes” evaluations went from 0% at baseline to 82% by the end of the intervention phase.

Ty received his self-determination contract after 14 days of baseline. During this time Ty received six “Yes” evaluations and eight “No” evaluations. During the intervention phase, Ty received three straight “No” evaluations, followed by 23 consecutive “Yes” evaluations from his supervisor. Ty’s percentage of workdays with “Yes” evaluations went from 43% at baseline to 88% by the end of the intervention phase.

Eric received error feedback, praise, and instruction from his supervisor during baseline. In 20 days of baseline, Eric received 7 “Yes” evaluations and 13 “No” evaluations. After an initial “No” evaluation after

Figure 4. *Eric’s contract.*

Self-Determination Contracts 26

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_






















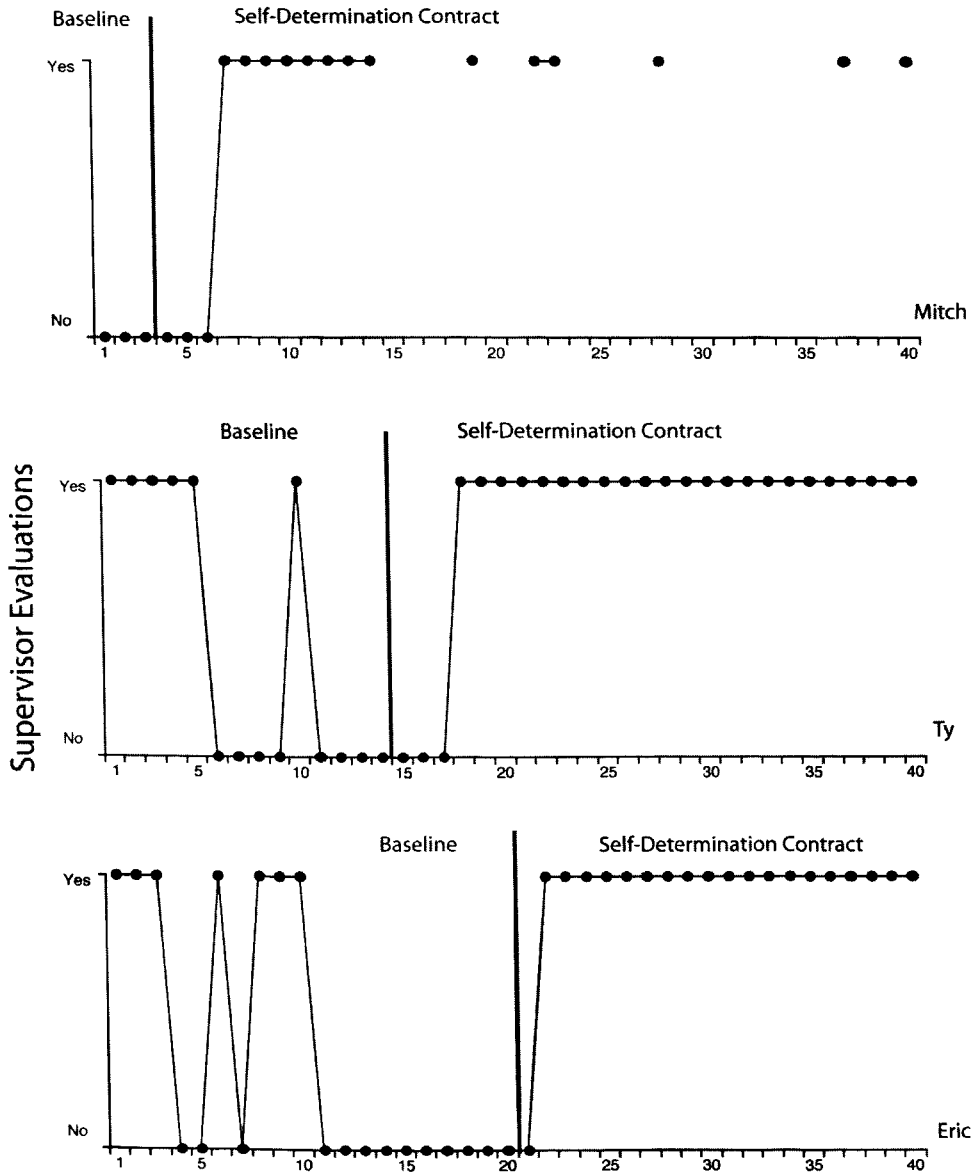
 Goals	 Work Y	 Social Y	 Personal Y			
 Plans	 1. Pay attention and ask questions if you need help <input type="checkbox"/>	 2. Work Faster <input type="checkbox"/>	 3. Talk more to co-workers <input type="checkbox"/>	 4. Don't watch my watch <input type="checkbox"/>	 5. Wear blue or black pants to work <input type="checkbox"/>	 6. Make sure hair is combed. <input type="checkbox"/>
 Concern	<input type="checkbox"/> Listen carefully and follow directions	<input type="checkbox"/> Pay attention Improve speed Be a rabbit.	<input type="checkbox"/> Say Hi! Say Goodbye!	<input type="checkbox"/> Work until the job is done.	<input type="checkbox"/> Check myself in the mirror before leaving for work	<input type="checkbox"/> Check myself in the mirror before leaving for work.
 Solution						
 Boss thinks:	 Work Y N	 Social Y N	 Personal Y N			
 Next time:	 Goal? Work Y N	 Social Y N	 Personal Y N			

Figure 5. Changes in supervisor evaluations as a result of self-determination contracts.



the introduction of the self-determination contract, Eric earned 19 consecutive “Yes” evaluations. Eric’s percentage of workdays with “Yes” evaluations went from 35% at baseline to 95% by the end of the intervention phase.

## DISCUSSION

The three workers in this study participated in a supported employment program for adults with disabilities that embraced self-determination interventions. They had each successfully completed the community-based situational assessment phase of their supported employment program and had secured a desired placement in a community job, but each experienced on-the-job problems. In each case, employers requested additional support from the supported employment program’s employment specialist, indicating that the individual’s job might be at stake if performance did not improve. The three workers met employer expectations within four days of intervention. Their high rate of performance maintained for the remainder of the study. In each case, the worker saved his job due to a quick turn-around of behavior and consistent high performance.

This study demonstrated that self-determination contracts enabled participants to improve their on-the-job performance from job-threatening levels to levels that met their supervisor’s expectations. Thus, the findings suggest that on-the-job fluency problems may be addressed by teaching the worker to use self-determination contracts.

The replicated AB design used in this study suggests the effectiveness of the intervention through replication; however, the design may not have controlled for all possible internal validity threats. We used a multi-component intervention package to quickly improve supervisors’ evaluations because the workers faced imminent termination. Unfortunately, we did not determine the effectiveness of the individual intervention components. It is conceivable that any one of the interventions alone might have resulted in observed improvements in the participants’ job performance.

The AB data stream occurred at different points in time and independently of each other. Thus, we did not use a multiple-baseline design. According to Baer, Wolf, and Risley (1987), a good design does not need to be “imitated from a textbook,” but needs to answer the research question convincingly (p. 319). In this study, this criterion was met by demonstrating that the use of self-determination contracts changed supervisor perceptions from negative to positive, removing the immediate threat of termination.

### *Implications for Educators*

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 1997) emphasizes that the purpose of special education is to prepare students for employment and

independent living. To do this, the act mandates that a statement of needed transition services must be included in the IEP. Students whose desired course of study includes vocational training and community experience components may benefit from the use of self-determination contracts both in class and in their community experiences. Through these contracts, students learn to approach their supervisor for feedback on their performance, and that feedback in turn may be used to develop intervention programs.

Self-determination is “a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior” (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 2). By choosing work-related goals, making a plan to achieve those goals, managing behavior with those goals in mind, and making adjustments based on supervisor evaluations, workers and supervisors may address work-related problems and skill deficits in order to bring performance to levels that meet employer expectations.

The Adaptability Model considered adjustment a major component responsible for on-the-job success (Mithaug et al., 1987). Learning to adjust in the face of changing work demands, for instance, enables workers to achieve positive supervisor evaluations. The Self-Determined Learning Theory considers learning as adjustment. That is, individuals learn when impediments block goal achievement, and they make needed adjustments. In this study, the self-determination contracts brought together all of the information necessary to make the necessary adjustments.

Participants in supported employment and transition-age youth with disabilities should not be viewed as passive recipients of the actions of others. By using self-determination contracts, individuals with disabilities learn to set goals, evaluate their performance to a set standard, plan how to adapt on the job, and make the needed adjustments. While one does not become “self-determined” simply by using a self-determination contract, such contracts provide opportunities to learn and practice self-determined behavior. These critical skills empower workers to become successful and take control of their lives.

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