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Institute Brief: More Than Just a Job: Person-Centered Career Planning

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MORE THAN JUST A JOB: PERSON-CENTERED CAREER PLANNING

Colleen Condon, Kristin Fichera, and Danielle Dreilinger

PERSON-CENTERED CAREER PLANNING: WHAT IS IT?

Person-centered career planning is an approach to career development that helps people with disabilities identify and achieve their goals. It uses job seekers' personal preferences, interests, desires, and needs to guide the career planning process. Person-centered career planning helps people figure out what they want to do, and then helps them organize a plan to get there.

Person-centered career planning focuses on identifying what the job seeker wants to do, rather than focusing primarily on their skills and limitations. It does not have to involve any meetings, nor is it only for people with the most significant disabilities. In fact, anyone can benefit from using their interests and passions to guide their job search.

IN THIS BRIEF, YOU WILL LEARN TO:

- ▶ See career planning as an ongoing process, not a one-time event.
- ▶ Develop a job-seeker-focused, job-seeker-directed approach to career planning.
- ▶ Build careers around the preferences and aspirations of job seekers.
- ▶ Include job seekers' personal and professional support networks in career planning.

WHY DO YOU DO IT?

Good career planning is essential for people to find jobs that fit them well. Just placing someone in a job is not enough; a high-quality job match is necessary for a person to succeed in a position long-term. To reach this goal, employment specialists must work with job seekers to see what is important to them in a job and to find a job that meets their criteria.

At the core of person-centered career planning is the belief that the job seeker must be the director of his or her career. If the wants and needs of the job seeker are not taken into account during job development, it is likely that the job seeker will not stay in a job placement for long. Person-centered career planning can improve job satisfaction and retention.

A job means many things to many people: it can simply be a way to earn money, or it can be a route to community participation, feeling productive, improving personal relationships, and enhancing quality of life. In person-centered career planning, what a job seeker wants from employment will be defined—and redefined—again and again.

WHEN DO YOU DO IT?

People's goals and preferences change over time. Therefore, person-centered career planning is an evolving process. A change in plans by the job seeker is natural, healthy, expected, and encouraged. The average American has eight to ten jobs and two to three career changes during his or her lifetime. It is important to help job seekers establish a process that they can return to at any time, with or without assistance from an employment specialist. Person-centered career planning can be used when people are looking for their very first job, when they want to learn new skills, when they want to get promoted, when they want to change careers, and even when they are satisfied in their job and everything is going well.



Sara—The Power of a Dream

Sara was a thirty-five-year-old woman with a significant developmental disability who had been working in a sheltered workshop for over ten years. One day she told Joe, her employment specialist, that she wanted to work outside of the workshop doing something new. When Joe asked Sara what she wanted to do, she could not come up with any ideas. Joe asked her about her interests. Sara stated that she liked to do needlepoint, spend time with her nieces and nephews, and go shopping. When asked about her dreams, Sara exclaimed, "I want to become the mayor of Boston, and I want to rebuild the city under water!"

Were these realistic dreams? Hardly. But Joe didn't shut her down. Instead, he followed up with more questions. What appealed to her about rebuilding the city underwater? Why did she want to be the mayor? What would it feel like if her dream job were reality?

After talking together, and including Sara's mother in the discussion, Joe and Sara realized that her unrealistic "dream job" had some very practical applications. Sara loved politics (which generated the "mayor" idea), and she was unhappy with her weight (being in the water felt comfortable to her). Joe realized that Sara's tight work area at the workshop made her uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally.

Joe and Sara used these interests and her desire to change to pursue a course of action. Sara found a new job in a large college library, joined the volunteer squad for a political campaign, and started to meet regularly with a nutritionist to lose weight.

Lessons learned:

- Even an "impossible" dream holds important clues to a person's interests and needs.
- Make sure to ask about a job seeker's interests. It's important to know what drives the person.
- Ask questions to find out the "whys" behind job seekers' answers.
- People are more open to working with you when you don't ignore their desires and passions.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

Person-centered career planning may involve many people or just a few. However, the involvement of a network of trusted people—a career-planning group—is usually a key component of the process. The job seeker works with the employment specialist to identify whom to involve, and the job seeker has the final say in deciding who participates and how.

When choosing whom to involve in the career-planning group, ask:

- ▶ How well do they know the job seeker?
- ▶ Can they contribute to planning?
- ▶ Are they willing to participate?
- ▶ Will they follow through on commitments?

Some job seekers will want to work one-on-one with their employment specialist. Others will want to call a few people to solicit their opinions, and still others will want a big meeting with everyone they know. Family members, friends, professionals, and employers might be involved, but it will be different for everyone.

THERE ARE FOUR KEY COMPONENTS WHEN DEVELOPING A PERSON-CENTERED CAREER PLAN:

1. Organizing resources
2. Figuring out what makes a "good" job
3. Choosing a job
4. Establishing a lifelong process of planning and development

1.

ORGANIZING RESOURCES

This is when the job seeker and employment specialist decide who will be involved in the process and what the process will look like. Again, this will be different for everyone. For some, it will begin with a large gathering, with numerous family members, friends, and professionals in attendance. For others, it will be a series of one-on-one meetings with an employment specialist, or phone calls to key individuals in the job seeker's life.

2.

FIGURING OUT WHAT MAKES A "GOOD" JOB

The next task should be to develop a profile of the job seeker. This includes information about activities, likes, and dislikes at home, work, school, and recreation. The employment specialist will need to consider what choices the job seeker has made, what influenced those choices, and why he or she liked or disliked certain activities. These questions often require some probing before they are answered.

Don't be concerned if the conversation includes components that seem unrealistic (see sidebar: "Sara: The Power of a Dream"). Talking with people about their hopes and desires can help you learn more about them and help them to think about things they enjoy, which may lead to a job, or perhaps part of a job.

The next step is to look at recurring themes from the job seeker's profile and try to tie them together into a coherent job description. Many times job seekers' interests, likes, and dislikes are ignored in favor of skills, aptitudes, and learning assessments. Employment specialists need to attend to the hopes and passions of job seekers as well. At this point, begin to brainstorm possible jobs, tasks, and locations, and to list contacts

of people in the career-planning group. These should all be chosen to fit the job seeker's skills and interests.

Finally, it is important to look at possible barriers to succeeding in the jobs that were listed. The point of this is not to eliminate jobs from consideration but to "get a leg up" on solving problems before they can get in the way of a successful placement.

3.

CHOOSING A JOB

Once job development efforts have resulted in a possible job match, the job seeker and employment specialist use the information they've gathered to decide whether that job meets the goals outlined. You can also use this analysis phase to examine whether a current job still meets a job seeker's needs.

People often make compromises in life choices, and job choices are no different. It is often difficult to gather all of the information about a job before deciding to make a commitment. Job matching is an art, not a science, and many decisions have to be made by "feel" and by relying on intuition. There is no magic formula that will distinguish between making a sensible compromise and settling for an unacceptable job offer. It takes a good working relationship with the job seeker and potential employer. The service provider must also be able to give advice while respecting the job seeker's ultimate responsibility to make their own life choices.

Is it a good job match?

What was the initial stated career goal (including job title, salary, hours, and benefits)?

- Does this job fit with it?
- If not, are these compromises the job seeker is willing to make?

What is the culture like at the potential place of employment?

- Is this a culture that the job seeker wants and will fit in with?

Does the job seeker currently have the ability to do the job?

- If not, what training is needed to help the job seeker get the skills?
- How will the job seeker get this training?

4.

ESTABLISHING A LIFELONG PROCESS OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

If we are committed to career planning as an ongoing process, evaluation is not an ending but the beginning of a new phase. Employment specialists need to encourage and enable job seekers to reevaluate their current employment situation and move on to other job options when desired. Traditionally, workers have had to develop job-related problems or lose their jobs before further career planning would be offered. Ongoing evaluation is meant to legitimize job change as healthy, natural, and expected, rather than atypical or problematic. The evaluation process, done at regular intervals or in response to worker or family requests, answers the following questions:

- ▶ Have things changed for the worker, for his/her significant others, or in the job?
- ▶ Is the worker dissatisfied, bored, or having concerns with his/her job?
- ▶ Is the employer dissatisfied or having concerns with the worker's performance?

If the answer to all three is "no," then for the time being no job change is needed. However, even when all parties are satisfied with the current state of affairs, regular reviews should still take place. This will keep the career-planning group on top of any changes that occur.

If the answer to any of the above questions is "yes," the reasons need to be analyzed. People's likes, dislikes, and aspirations change over time. If the worker and other interested people decide a job change is needed, then it's time to repeat the career-planning process. The job seeker's profile should be reviewed with the career-planning group, and the group should support the job seeker in making modifications to a current job or in finding a new one. The composition of the career-planning group will probably change over time as the job seeker's network expands and as members' professional and personal lives evolve.

Justin—Exceeding Expectations

Justin had been out of high school for two years and was working at a fast-food restaurant. Everyone saw this as a great success, except for Justin. What he really wanted to do was work in an office like the rest of his family, but due to his Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder he was told that this goal was not realistic. After begging for a chance to learn how to use computers, Justin enrolled in a program to learn basic word-processing skills. He completed six months of training, but scored very low on all the word-processing tests. A team meeting was held to determine Justin's next step.

Attending the meeting were Justin, his father, his sister Theresa, his employment specialist Jodi, his VR counselor Bob, and his training instructor Lisa. The meeting began on a very negative note, with Lisa and Bob describing what a failure the computer training program had been for Justin. Everyone at the meeting, except for Justin and Jodi, agreed that an office job would not be realistic for him and thought that he should concentrate on working at the restaurant.

Justin was upset by their reaction. He and Jodi had met the day before to talk about his desire to work in an office and the skills he would bring to an office position. He talked about wanting to get dressed up every day, to commute into the city, and to work in a corporate environment.

After a long meeting, a compromise was made: Justin would continue working at the restaurant four days a week, and would spend one day looking for a job. He asked everyone for assistance with his job search. Four months later, Justin's persistence paid off: He was offered a full-time job working in a mailroom at the same company as his sister. Theresa had arranged for an informational interview and tour of the mailroom for Justin, which led to the job. Even though there was a gap between the exact skills needed for the job and Justin's current abilities, Jodi helped him recognize all the skills he had learned working at the restaurant: time management, customer service, working in a fast-paced environment, and handling multiple tasks. After initial job coaching from Jodi, Justin became independent on the job with some natural supports from his co-workers.

Five years later, Justin has been promoted twice within his company. He now works the front desk in the main reception area greeting guests, logging in packages, and doing some basic data entry on his own computer.

Lessons learned:

- Believe in people and their abilities.
- Work with job seekers' enthusiasms.
- Help people recognize the transferable skills they have.

RESOURCES—WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND JOB SEARCH BOOKS

- ▶ *Demystifying Job Development: Field-Based Approaches to Job Development for People with Disabilities.*
David Hoff, Cecilia Gandolfo, Marty Gold, & Melanie Jordan. TRN, Inc., 2000.
- ▶ *The Career Guide for Creative and Unconventional People.*
Carol Eikleberry, Ph.D. Ten Speed Press, 1995.
- ▶ *What Color Is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters & Career-Changers.*
Richard N. Bolles. Ten Speed Press, updated annually.
- ▶ *Job Search Handbook for People with Disabilities.*
Dr. Daniel J. Ryan. Jist Publishing, 2004.

ASSESSMENT AND CAREER EXPLORATION TOOLS

America's Labor Market Information System and America's Career Kit have a number of excellent resources:

- ▶ *America's Career InfoNet* (www.acinet.org) includes a wealth of information on job trends, wages, and national and local labor markets. Click on "Career Tools" to get started.
- ▶ *O*NET Online* (<http://online.onetcenter.org>) is a database that describes a wide variety of occupations and their requisite skills and earning potential.
- ▶ *O*NET Career Assessment and Exploration Tools* (www.onetcenter.org/product/tools.html) has several self-assessments.

ICI PUBLICATIONS (*available at www.communityinclusion.org*)

- ▶ *Getting the Most from the Public Vocational Rehabilitation System.*
Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 19.
- ▶ *Making Networking Easier for Job Seekers: A Guide.*
Institute Brief, Issue No. 20.
- ▶ *Starting with Me: A Guide to Person-Centered Planning for Job Seekers.*
Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 14.
- ▶ *Networking: Your Guide to an Effective Job Search.*
Tools for Inclusion, Issue No. 7.

TRAINING AND CONSULTATION ON PERSON-CENTERED PLANNING

The ICI offers training and consultation on person-centered planning and other job-development activities for employment staff and job seekers. Contact Cecilia Gandolfo for information about how we can help you improve your outcomes.

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Region 1

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