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Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Workplace: The Impact on the Individual, Employer, and Fellow Coworkers

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Creating a diverse and inclusive workplace:

The impact on the individual, employer, and fellow co-workers

Developmental service sector agencies have traditionally assisted people with disabilities gain employment through a social service model, where employers hire for charitable reasons, because it is “the right thing to do”, or as a corporate-social responsibility. Reflecting a deficits-based approach, where impairment is emphasized to prompt action, this method (re)produces low expectations of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Implementing strengths-based employment services challenges this traditional, deficit-based framework by presenting the skills of job seekers with IDD as a desirable job match to satisfy workplace requirements. Such actions that resist disabling assumptions created by dominant social structures possess the capacity to stimulate social change, and thus movement toward a shared, preferred future. Given the necessity of hope to sustain collective effort toward a communal goal, we qualitatively examined the presence of hope within strengths-based employment settings for adults with IDD to understand its potential to stimulate social change related to inclusive workplaces. Employees with IDD (n = 16), employers (n = 12), and co-workers (n = 12) involved with strengths-based employment services completed one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Collected data, examined using inductive thematic analysis, evidenced practices of hope within strength-based employment services for people with IDD:

- (1) *co-sharing of strengths* to reach collective goals,
- (2) *movement toward a shared, preferred future* related to inclusive workplaces offering meaningful employment for people with IDD,

- (3) *aligning collective and personal goals* where the achievement of individual goals contributed to the attainment of a shared preferred future, and the
- (4) *possibility for co-transformation* through an openness to the concurrent shaping of oneself and others, as all participants identified an altered understanding of the abilities of people with IDD.

Overall, implementation of strengths-based employment services is supported, as it provides an avenue for the cultivation of hope, which creates potential for social change, and supports collective movement toward inclusive and equitable workplaces.