

International Encyclopedia of Rehabilitation

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Supported Employment

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Introduction

In this article we will try to show an overview of what is Supported Employment. We will provide a general vision of this tool for integration into open employment for people with disabilities and other social disadvantage groups.

For this proposal the origin and definitions will be reviewed, after which the characteristics and philosophy, and the evolution of the model will be discussed. Although practices may differ among disability groups or countries, some core practices are clearly defined. In this sense will show the international approach proposed by the European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE) and the fundamental elements that could be considered. Finally some critical questions will be discussed.

Origin and definition

Supported employment is a strategy for job creation for people with disability, that arose in the 1980's in the United States. Although developed primarily for people with developmental disabilities (mental handicap/intellectual impairments) supported employment is currently used with all disability groups, notably persons with physical disabilities or mental health issues. Several authors have defined supported employment and we can consider the definitions contributed by Paul Wehman and David Mank as representative of all, if we understand and apply the definitions to all disability groups.

Paul Wehman, for many, is one of the the fathers and the main supporter of supported employment. He has defined it as “competitive work in integrated settings, for individuals for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred... services available; but not limited to provision of skilled job trainers, on-the-job training, systematic training, job development, follow-up services...” (Wehman et al. 1987) or as “... paid employment for persons with developmental disabilities for whom competitive employment at or above the minimum wage is unlikely, and who, because of their disabilities, need ongoing support to perform their work. Support is provided through activities such as training, supervision and transportation. Supported employment is conducted in a variety of settings, particularly worksites in which persons without disabilities are employed.”... “Supported employment is a combination of employment and ongoing services. It is a type of employment, not a method of employment preparation nor a type of service activity. It is a powerful and flexible way to ensure normal employment benefits, provide ongoing and appropriate support, create opportunities, and achieve full participation, integration and flexibility.” (Wehman et al. 1992).

David Mank, another investigator in the field, defines it as “remunerated employment in settings of the community, with individualized and continued support that ensures the long term success, and in which exist clear opportunities for interaction with people without disabilities” (Mank 1998).

The official definition of supported employment used in the United States, that we have extracted from the publication of McGaughey and Mank (1999), is the one that appears in the Part I SAW par. C of the Amendments to the Law of Rehabilitation of 1986 (PL 99-596), and that more recently is redefined in the Amendments to the Law of Rehabilitation of 1998 (PL 105-220) and is a “competitive work in integrated work settings, or employment in integrated work settings in which individuals are working toward competitive work, consistent with the strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice of the individuals. . . for individuals with the most significant disabilities; (a) for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred; or (b) for whom competitive employment has been interrupted or intermittent as a result of a significant disability; and who, because of the nature and severity of their disability, need intensive supported employment services.

Supported employment responds then to an approach “place then train” as opposed to other traditional approaches that use procedures of “train then place” (Corrigan 2001, Trochim et al. 1994).

In this article we define “supported employment” as an employment integrated in the community within standardized companies for people with disabilities who traditionally have not had access to the labour market, by means of the necessary support inside and outside of the working place, and in employment conditions as similar as possible to work and pay of other workers without disabilities in a comparable position within the same company (Jordán de Urríes and Verdugo, 2001 and 2003; Verdugo and Jordán de Urríes, 2001). This definition is perfectly applicable by extension to other groups who are in a situation of social disadvantage with special problems of access to the ordinary labour market.

Characteristics and philosophy

Supported employment has well specified characteristics formulated by Wehman, Sale and Parent in 1992:

1. Employment. The purpose of these programs is employment with all the regular outcomes of having a job. Wages, working conditions, and job security are key considerations.
2. Ongoing support. The focus is on providing the ongoing support required to get and keep a job rather than on getting a person ready for a job sometime in the future.
3. Jobs, not services. Emphasis is on creating opportunities to work rather than just providing services to develop skills.
4. Full Participation. People who are severely disabled are not excluded. The assumption is that all persons, regardless of the degree of their disability, have the capacity to undertake supported employment if appropriate ongoing support services can be provided.

5. Variety and flexibility. Supported employment does not lock programs into one or two work options. It is flexible because of the wide range of jobs in the community and the many ways of providing support to individuals in those jobs.

The underpinning principles are clearly identified by David Mank in 1998:

- The work has meaning in our life.
- The people with significant disabilities can work.
- Integration and inclusion are preferable to segregation and exclusion.
- Choice and satisfaction are valuable.
- Development of career, not only of employment
- To create individual supports, not programs
- Emphasis in the Quality of Life

As David Mank indicates in one of his publications, this modality has been demonstrated in different studies and if we compared it with other segregated types of supports, supported employment wages are better, integration and social networks are improved, and it is effective for all types of disabilities (Mank 1998). Supported employment is also a key element to carry out a suitable transition from the school to the world of work and to independent living, since it is the best adapted tool to “provide job support that triggers self-determination, satisfaction, maintenance of employment and Quality of Life” (Jenaro 1998).

In keeping with the principles of the social model of disability, which centers on environmental and cultural factors as the primary cause of the marginalization of disabled people, supported employment entails adapting the environment and workplace culture as necessary to enable a disabled person who has the requisite skills to do a particular job. The European Union of Supported Employment defines supported employment in his Information Booklet and Quality Standards, translated into six languages, as “providing support to people with disabilities or other disadvantaged groups to secure and maintain paid employment in the open labour market” (Evans et al. 2005).

Evolution

The development of supported employment from its beginnings in the 1980’s (Wehman and Bricout 1999) shows a clear evolution of the model. Supported employment arises in a situation of preponderance of segregated employment, when fundamental technical tools like applied behaviour analysis are appearing. It had a slow emergence of a mainly experimental character in the 1970s. It had a real emergence and an implementation in the 1980’s thanks to extensive funding of supported employment programmes by the US government, and it reached a stage of conceptualization and critical review in the 90’s, when it came to be extended to a wide range of disability groups. This evolution has come with a change of approach that progressively switched from a selection of people to a dynamization of community resources of the community, from focusing solely on the person, to having an ecological perspective (O’Brien 1990).

The components of the model, their functions and its phases of development, in spite of remaining more or less stable from the initial exposition of the model, have varied substantially up to the conceptual change that has taken place for the person with

disabilities. It has switched from a role of simple user of services to a client role, in which the contribution, indications, aspirations and demands of the person are fundamental. One is to put into the hands of the client the control of his own process integrating him as the fundamental piece, giving him a real opportunity to make choices, and so being able to reach self-determination. This conceptual change implies a change in the practices that were developed at every moment of the process in the 80's and 90's to reach different practices that put the person with disabilities in that new situation (Brooke et al. 1995).

The supported employment model has been widely adopted (Beyer et al., in press; Corbière and Lecomte 2001; Jordán de Urríes, Beyer and Verdugo, 2008; Schneider, 2008). A number of randomised controlled trials of supported employment for clients of community mental health teams undertaken in several countries, a model known as Individual Placement and Support (Bond et al., 2008; Latimer et al. 2006, Burns et al., 2007), has established a strong evidence base for this approach, and has specified the conditions for its implementation in a fidelity scale (Bond et al., 1997; Becker et al., 2001).

Phases

Supported employment is a dynamic process managed by the individual. The European Union of Supported Employment, EUSE (Evans et al., 2004) has proposed a series of phases of development. These phases are accepted as a model of good practice and they are a part of the general frame of Supported Employment. Each one of these phases includes an ample range of activities, some of which are specific to a type of disability while others are of a more universal character, and as such can be applied to all types of underprivileged groups. Throughout all the phases and activities, the service agencies must consider the adjustment of the time used for each one, based on the characteristics, necessities, demands, and desires of the user, trying to be dynamic and thus to take responsibility for not wasting time for the users.

First stage - Engagement

This phase probably includes the most ample range of activities, most of which are specific not only to the different groups of people with disabilities but also to individuals of any underprivileged group. Two fundamental values govern this phase. These are, in the first place, to provide accessible information and, secondly, to help the individual to use that information and to make an informed decision.

The activities included in this phase must be appropriate and centered around the individual. Also, these must be part of a personal agreed employment plan, whose ultimate aim is to help the individual to participate in the job market. One assumes that, at the end of this phase, individuals can make an informed decision about whether supported employment is the means by which they want to get a job and, if he/she wishes to work with that organization.

Second Phase-Vocational Profiling

The activities included in this phase are directed so that the individuals appraise their own strengths and capabilities. The final result is a detailed profile on professional questions, a profile that will play an important role in the rest of the process. Supported employment enables people in search of work the opportunity to choose a job that is

compatible with their interests, aspirations, necessities, situation and previous experience. This planning process is based on the empowerment process, supporting participants to make their own decisions about their career, and to participate in the design of their own job plan, according to their interests and aspirations. In summary, in this phase of planning an approach centered on the person must be adopted.

Third Phase-Job Finding

The job finding represents an important phase, since the activities included in this phase can exert an influence on employers and in this way guarantee employment to the people who look for it. Since an optimal system to find employment does not exist, the services of supported employment must consider those activities that better adjust to the necessities of the parties. Although the agency must never decide who must lead an employment search and who must not, the client must maintain control of the activities at all moments, receiving from the agency the necessary advice and preparation for making an informed decision. In spite of the effects associated with disability or any other disadvantage, the process must remain in the hands of the client, whereas the role of the agency of supported employment is to orient and to offer advice. A series of methods exists that can be useful in finding a job or a suitable company. These are to design a Curriculum Vitae, to respond to published employment offers, to send letters to companies, to call companies by telephone and to offer oneself as a worker, to participate in testing (although these are limited in time), to create contacts with companies, and to create working stations on behalf of the supported employment agency.

Fourth phase-Employer Engagement

The activities included in this phase depend on the degree of involvement of the company, as well the format in which the contacts are developed with this company. It is necessary to indicate that it is in this phase that the offer of the company is specified. And therefore, a meeting between the company and a professional of the specialized organization of supported employment is organized (presumably accompanied by the person in search of employment).

Fifth phase-On/Off Job Support

The degree, amount and nature of the support dedicated to persons will depend on their necessities, capacities and the labour situation. In any case, support is an essential element of supported employment and therefore it is something that is present in all the phases of the process. The professional support should disappear gradually to be replaced by the support of the other working companions. The degree of provided support and the substitution strategy must be planned and examined by the workers, the company and the individual.

The provision of supports inside and outside of the work place empowers the individuals, offering them the opportunity to learn and to work adequately, to be a member of a working team and to contribute to the culture of the company, and help them to ascend in their professional career. Aside from this, the provision of support inside and outside the work place serves to equip the company with a support mechanism and to offer the worker new knowledge and better capacity. All this contributes as well to the development of natural supports (intrinsic) in the workplace.

Any package of support measures must be centered on the individual, in addition to being flexible.

Fundamental elements

In all this process, there are two fundamental elements. One is the job coach. He/she is the professional responsible for providing the training and for putting into place the necessary support. The second one is the support. The labour counsellor has to be respected as he/she has been a key piece in the development of the supported employment, but his/her role has undergone an evolution similar to the one that the model has undergone. Brooke, Wehman, Inge and Parent (1995) raised this conceptual change in the figure of the labour counsellor which they happened to denominate as “employment specialist in the community”, a denomination which we fully endorse, raising the figure of a flexible and multipurpose professional, indicating the functions that are to be fulfilled and the roles that are to be carried out at every moment: Planner, Consultant, Compiler of information, Technician, and Community Resource.

The second fundamental element, as we have indicated, is self support. The supports are necessary elements for the workers to cope with the deficits derived from their impairments, and to engage in their employment in a successful way. These supports can come from different sources that the specialist in employment in the community has to control and manage for use by the client. Wehman and Bricout (1999a) determine the different sources of support available in employment for which they are the mediating agent: support provided by the agency, supports provided by the world of work, supports provided by the government, and supports provided by the family and the community. This taxonomy could be extended to other aspects of the community with slight variations based on the cause that generates the support needed.

The development of the supports will have to be the most natural possible. It is fundamental to indicate that, as the labour counsellor is important for the success of the supports, and as critical are the technologies and strategies of support, all that depends on the active participation and the leadership of the consumer. Without the experience, ideas, and feedback of the person with disabilities, suitable labour supports would not be developed.

Critical questions

In the present stage of supported employment, and considering the conceptual changes made in the last years, there are several critical questions we should keep in mind (Wehman and Bricout, 1999):

1. The utilization of community and workplace supports is not a panacea for correcting all of the shortcomings observed in supported employment implementation.
2. The basic premises on which supported employment was established have not changed, despite the expansion to include new service technologies.
3. The reliance on the community and workplace supports is not an all-or-nothing, sink-or-swim approach, but rather one of the supportive features of the existing supported employment model.
4. With the advent of new and creative support technologies, the job coach role is not eliminated, but remains an essential element.

In Europe (Jordán de Urríes et al., 2008; Beyer, Jordán de Urríes and Verdugo, in press) and surely anywhere else in the world, supported employment has extended not only geographically, but also to the great majority of types of disabilities and a great variety of groups in situation of risk of exclusion for causes other than to disabilities. A methodological adaptation to different types of groups and situations is implied. This need not mean insurmountable barrier, since the supported employment has always stemmed from the premise of the adaptation to each person and situation. The critical question will come rather in relation to sustaining services of supported employment for this variety of users. The answer stems from the use of models of financing based on results, and where that financing is based on the variety and intensity of the needed support of the group that is served (Verdugo et al. 2009).

The adaptation of the model to each person will probably lead us towards current and innovative concepts like “customized employment” (Wehman et al, 2007; Inge, 2008). This implies matching individually the needs, abilities and interests of the workers with disabilities, with the specific needs of the employer. This can imply adjustments, adaptations, or different initiatives that will finally result in customized job responsibilities for the worker with disabilities, but also meeting the needs of the employer. We are referring to still more refinements in the development of the supported employment.

Aspects related to the development of quality are already fundamental. But this quality must be associated with excellent results for the person and be evidence based. In Europe, the European Union of Supported Employment requires the development of quality standards (Evans et al. 2005). These standards are already being applied in one country in a practical way (Verdugo, Jordán de Urríes and Vicent, 2009). On the other hand, in the United States, the concern for quality (Wehman et al, 2007), and for the fidelity of the programs to the foundations of supported employment (Bond et al. 2000) is raising.

It seems suitable to conclude with a quote from Paul Wehman that summarizes clearly the final purpose of this methodology, to put people with disabilities in a situation of being able to advance in the labour market through their own choices, starting from their needs, to reach the goals they set, increasing the capacity of self-determination of the worker who uses the services of supported employment.

“Admittedly, people with disabilities, their families, friends and community may not always share the same perspective, or objectives. In the context of this discussion, the employment supports provided by each of these parties is conceived as serving consumer centered goals and objectives. Regardless of the good intentions and consumer focus of others, individuals with disabilities must still negotiate with their interpersonal support systems. As members of family groups, work organizations, and a broader community, people with disabilities have to reconcile competing tugs toward dependence and independence, just as their non-disabled peers must. The work and career goals they pursue are undertaken in a framework that requires both choice and compromise. What must not be compromised; however, is the ability of the consumer to realize an employment situation that they find

satisfying. The efforts of family, friends, disabled peers, community, agency, business, and government must have the needs and aspirations of the individual with a disability as their focus for this goal of consumer satisfaction to be achieved.” (Wehman and Bricout, 1999).

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