

Presentation

Impactful onboarding for supported employment professionals: A firm foundation for employment first supports

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Abstract.

BACKGROUND: Commitments to Employment First fluctuate among service providers nationwide. The Supported Employment field is also experiencing a workforce retention crisis. A structured onboarding process is often non-existent or siloed within the literal and figurative walls of the provider agency. This article summarizes a presentation selected for the 2022 National APSE Conference entitled *Impactful Onboarding for Supported Employment Professionals* which explores onboarding concepts and strategies for newly hired Employment Support Professionals that align with Employment First principles.

OBJECTIVE: The purpose of the presentation was to promote the purposeful design and implementation of an onboarding that engages new Employment Support Professionals around each service provider's vision, values, and processes while equipping them with quality training and instruction that aligns with Employment First and the standards of practice across the Supported Employment field.

CONCLUSION: Developing an Employment First focused onboarding for newly hired Employment Support Professionals is integral to the efficacy of direct services.

Keywords: APSE, supported employment, employment first, onboarding, training

1. Introduction

“Onboarding is an art. Each new employee brings with them the potential to achieve and succeed. To lose the energy of a new hire through poor onboarding is an opportunity lost,” offers Sarah Wetzel, Human Resources Director at engage:BDR. Organizations with a strong onboarding structure increase

hiring retention by 80% and productivity by at least 70% (Laurano, 2015). In a field where the average turnover rate of Direct Support Professionals is approximately 42.8%, an organization's training practices and professional development are key indicators of an employee's decision to stay in their role (Baker, 2021). Developing an Employment First focused onboarding for newly hired Employment Support Professionals that braids together the service provider's operating procedures and the standards of

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practice across the Supported Employment field is integral to the efficacy of direct services.

An impactful onboarding for Employment Support Professionals encompasses five core components that promote a customized onboarding experience synthesized with standardized, high-quality practices in the field. These elements include fundamental onboarding principles, welcoming new employees, customizing the onboarding experience, designing experiential training, and developing a Supported Employment Handbook. The artful composition of these concepts will yield an onboarding journey that equips new Employment Support Professionals for excellence and encourages an earnest commitment to their role.

2. Onboarding principles and concepts to consider

Any service provider's onboarding should be anchored in the following onboarding principles pertaining to goal, structure, content, and resources. Considering each of these areas while cultivating a meaningful onboarding will foster consistency and align commitments to quality among service providers.

2.1. Goal

It is vital for all Supported Employment providers to be aligned on the ultimate goal of onboarding. The goal of onboarding an Employment Support Professional is not only to engage new employees around an organization's vision, values, and processes, but to equip them with quality training and instruction which aligns with Employment First and the standards of practice across the Supported Employment field. It is an effort to impart provider specific knowledge and expectations while also instilling consistency of service delivery across the country, which is not something the Supported Employment field has established, in this author's professional opinion.

2.2. Structure

Each Supported Employment provider should have a formalized, structured onboarding process. The benefits of implementing a consistent, yet customizable experience are multifaceted.

A purposeful and personalized onboarding will ensure service providers impart training equally to

each Employment Specialist. All Employment Support Professionals receive the same training elements related to their core job functions. If onboarding is delivered from a tenuous mental list of objectives, the efficacy of the onboarding will be compromised. When the onboarding process is formalized, essential training elements are less likely to be omitted, albeit unintentionally.

Equitable training is a key effort in cultivating a customized onboarding. Not only should each Employment Support Professional receive the same training components, or equal training, but whenever possible, training is delivered to resonate with each person's strengths, opportunities, learning style, and accommodation needs. In other words, equitable onboarding achieves unified training objectives utilizing a person-centered approach.

Structured onboarding bolsters consistency in delivering quality, standard of practice services. If onboarding is focused on industry-wide best practices and each new employee receives the same training, leaders will subsequently increase the consistency of exceptional service provision among their teams. A firm foundation is established for career seekers to receive high-quality employment supports and advance their employment goals. Customer satisfaction is a key indicator of the caliber of onboarding.

Finally, structured onboarding provides resources, tools, and information for tenured employees to reference. Seasoned Employment Support Professionals are empowered to source their own answers to questions which is also beneficial for leaders. Employment Support Professionals are encouraged to problem solve independently leveraging existing resources and tools. Leaders can build their capacity to think critically and nurture their own development.

There are additional considerations to think through in developing employee onboarding.

- Develop an onboarding checklist to guide new employees through their training journey and ensure they complete all components.
- Document all policies and processes in a Supported Employment Handbook and determine how this resource will be accessible to the entire team.
- Design a flexible training that may be delivered individually, to a group, in person, or virtually, and identify how it may be adapted for accommodations requests.

2.3. Content

Employment Services onboarding should be a blended approach of four content components. First, as previously proposed, Supported Employment training should always align with national standards of practice. Failure to deliver training that reflects the field's competencies will compromise the efficacy of Supported Employment services and jeopardize the reality of each career seeker attaining competitive, inclusive employment. Or the career seeker will move on to a provider who is committed to quality services and supports them in advancing their goals.

Second, onboarding needs to include provider specific policies, procedures, and expectations. While training on effective service delivery must be standardized, each organization will have its own administrative and operational guidelines that support the business.

Third, ensure Employment Support Professional credential training and other formalized professional development opportunities are included in the onboarding journey. This may include ACRE Supported Employment Training, Customized Employment Training, Individual Placement and Supports Training, CESP Certification, Person Centered Thinking Training, and other professional development that enriches direct service work.

Finally, weave together both written and experiential learning. Diversify onboarding so employees will interact and feel engaged with their development.

2.4. Resources

Strategic resources are a critical pillar in developing a robust Supported Employment onboarding. Incorporate resources from the pacesetters of Employment First who are leading the way. The impact of onboarding is limited when siloed within the literal and figurative walls of the service provider.

3. Welcoming new employees: Foundations of engagement

When service providers welcome new employees to the team, they begin setting the foundations of employee engagement. The way new employees are welcomed is the first impression of the organization's work culture. It is essential that new employees feel appreciated and recognized for choosing to accept the job offer.

Welcoming new employees can be simple yet impactful.

- Consider personalized workspaces including handwritten notes from team members, company swag, small goodie bags, and welcome decorations.
- Take a new employee out to the lunch of their choosing to start building a personal relationship.
- Schedule an informal, inexpensive team event to foster new connections and relationship building. Employment Support Professionals leverage each other for support and idea sharing, therefore coordinating a casual gathering can break the ice and create a sense of familiarity and comfort, yielding more collaboration between co-workers in the future.
- Discuss the employee's expectations for onboarding. Give attention to any accommodation requests, support needs from leadership, and learning preferences. Thoughtfulness in these areas ensures the new employee is not statically consuming information. They can have an active voice in shaping impactful training and interact with their own growth.

4. Customized onboarding experience: Personalizing development

Just as service providers customize support for career seekers, there is a tremendous opportunity to personalize a new employee's onboarding experience. This does require thoughtful consideration of where training must remain consistent versus maximizing the customization of each person's experience. There are select components of the onboarding process that naturally make sense to personalize for the new employee.

Develop personalized onboarding plans. Consider where the new employee might need the most support, how they learn, what additional training might be meaningful, and at what pace to grow both the number of people they are supporting and the diversity of services provided. Always collaborate with the employee in creating their onboarding plan.

Utilize person-centered thinking tools. Consider having new employees complete a One Page Profile or reflect on what is important to and for the employee in their work. Leaders can understand more about

how their employee prefers to receive feedback and recognition.

Schedule regular touch-base milestones and check-ins. Allow the new employee to decide how often they may want to meet to touch base and what would make those check-ins most effective.

View onboarding through the lens of discovery. Akin to the process of Discovery in Customized Employment, be observant of how the new employee processes and interacts with their onboarding experience. What can leaders learn about the person that will enrich their career with the organization?

Ask employees what resources they may need to be successful. While common tools, resources, and devices are provided to all employees, allow each person to request items that will support their productivity. This could mean creating a comfortable workspace or ensuring they have the tools they feel will keep them organized.

5. Experiential training: Job shadowing

Job shadowing with peers should be a significant part of any onboarding. There is not one correct method to effectively coordinate job shadowing, however there are ideas to consider in navigating how to make job shadowing impactful.

Consider assigning each new employee to a peer mentor. A strong peer mentor can help a new Supported Employment Professional understand the nuances of their role, support leadership by answering questions, and help them navigate the work culture from a direct support perspective. This is also an ideal opportunity for a tenured Supported Employment Professional on the team to take on an elevated role as part of their growth and development. Leadership must be confident that the mentor chosen will authentically represent the organization and Employment First in their words and actions.

Schedule a range of comprehensive shadowing opportunities. Shadowing the delivery of different services is particularly important for employees who are new to the Supported Employment field. However, consider what job shadowing approach is the most meaningful to and for both the team and the new employee. Consider which Employment Support Professionals will effectively demonstrate best practices and exemplify the concepts and written training that have been imparted thus far in the onboarding journey. Decide if one Employment Specialist, such as the mentor, will conduct all shadowing or if the

new employee will shadow each specialist on the team to gain diverse perspectives. Leaders may also select Employment Support Professionals who excel in specific areas to partner with new employees.

6. The supported employment handbook: A written foundation

The author advocates for all Employment Services leaders to develop a Supported Employment Handbook for their department. It is a firm written foundation of information that will not only be useful for training new employees, but it is a valuable reference for tenured Employment Support Professionals, which alleviates time spent addressing information that is easily found in this resource. It is also a vital tool for performance management. If a service provider's policies and procedures are nebulous and undocumented, it is hard to hold people accountable to their job duties.

6.1. *Designing a supported employment handbook*

Designing a Supported Employment Handbook should encompass a braided balance of information specific to the organization as well as training that reflects industry wide standards of practice. Organizations should determine what information and training should be specific to their employment team versus where to demonstrate consistency among all service providers. For example, while administrative policies and operational procedures might vary across organizations, the Supported Employment field must have a shared vision and training around philosophy of practice and quality processes.

Identify what format will be most effective for the Supported Employment Handbook. Consider selecting Microsoft PowerPoint which equips this resource to be highly flexible and incorporate diverse learning styles. This platform may be utilized remotely or in person, offers a visually appealing aesthetic, promotes sustainability, and may be easily updated at any time.

Develop an outline of what modules will be essential to the Supported Employment Handbook. Curate topics that reflect the service provider's philosophy of practice, service delivery processes, professional expectations, administrative information, and any other information that will enrich the employment team's performance. Figure 1 illustrates a sample

<p>Philosophy of Practice </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statement of Beliefs • Competitive Integrated Employment • Employment First • APSE Ethical Guidelines • Person-Centered Thinking • Language We Use 	<p>Exploring Our Services </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Employment Journey • Overview of Services We Provide • Role of the Employment Specialist • Role of the Career Seeker/Employee • Role of the Funder • Role of the Employer • Role of the Support Network 	<p>Process: Quality Service Delivery </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career & Employment Planning (including Discovery, Ascend, Situational Assessment, Benefits Counseling, Disability Disclosure.) • Job Development • Job Coaching • Targeted, Ongoing Supports • Career Growth & Advancement • Additional Supported Employment Models (including Customized Employment & IPS) 	<p>Funding </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding Roadmap • Overview of Funding Sources (including DVR, Waiver, etc.) • Billing • Files & Documentation • Communication Expectations with Funders • Funding Contact List 	<p>Partners </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • APSE • COEF • Alliance • ANCOR
<p>Professional Expectations </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representing DDRC • Communications & Team Activities • Scheduling & Deadlines • Keeping Organized 		<p>History of Supported Employment </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History Overview • Notable Legislation • DDRC's Evolution of Service Delivery (including comparison of group versus CIE and the transition away from segregated practices) 		

Fig. 1. Sample supported employment handbook outline.

outline utilized by DDRC Employment Services, a service provider based in Lakewood, Colorado.

consistency if stakeholders are intentional every step of the way.

7. Conclusion

The goal of this 2022 National APSE Conference presentation was to ignite a commitment to designing and delivering onboarding that equips Employment Support Professionals for excellence in provision of services. Implementing the core components of an impactful onboarding – Onboarding Principles, Welcoming New Employees, Customizing the Onboarding Experience, and Designing Experiential Training – will foster a firm foundation for employee retention, high-quality supports, and customer satisfaction. Formalize this onboarding journey in a Supported Employment Handbook that serves the training needs of the Employment Services department by thoughtfully blending the service provider’s vision, values, and processes with quality training and instruction that aligns with standards of practice across the Supported Employment field.

If Employment First leaders and service providers seek to elevate the professionalization of the Supported Employment field, an onboarding journey that is both standardized and customized must be the cornerstone of professional development. There is a long, but achievable road ahead in cultivating this

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