

## Introduction to Special Issue

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# Supported Employment: What is it?

### 1. Introduction

It is my pleasure to introduce the first European and Australian special issue on supported employment. Through the incredible efforts of F. Borja Jordán de Urríes and Miguel Angel Verdugo, this issue and manuscripts were put together early in 2012. Supported employment has truly become a world-wide phenomena, a true way to help those with disabilities who are unable to successfully gain or retain employment on their own to enter the labor force with dignity and inclusion with others in society. These successes are a tribute to the individuals with disabilities and their families who were willing to venture out into the workforce and take a chance. These successes are a direct tribute to the employment specialists, the counselors, the job coaches and the rehabilitation psychologists who made these jobs a reality with day to day support and help when needed.

These successes are a tribute to the shopkeeper in Salamanca, to the restaurateur in Frankfurt, to the rancher in Australia, the printer in Rotterdam, all and many more who decided to it would be a good thing to hire a person with a disability and then hire another and then another.

The beauty of supported employment for people with disabilities is that it elevates them into the mainstream of society. And the beauty of this international issue is that we can see these successes are worldwide, not confined to Australia or the UK, or Spain or the USA or Hong Kong or Portugal, or Ireland. There is an international community that meets together to bring their finest thoughts together on how to make supported employment. For example in Dublin in June 2013 the European Union on Supported Employment will hold its 20th anniversary to celebrate supported employment and how it has impacted the lives of persons with disabilities and their families.

For decades, supported employment options have enabled individuals with significant support needs to

become employed in the community. In the United States, the definition of *supported employment* is as follows.

(1) Supported employment means: (i) Competitive employment in an integrated setting with ongoing support services for individuals with the most severe disabilities — (A) For whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred or for whom competitive employment has been interrupted or intermittent as a result of a severe disability; and (B) Who, because of the nature and severity of their disabilities, need intensive supported employment services from the designated State unit and extended services after transition in order to perform this work; or (ii) Transitional employment for individuals with the most severe disabilities due to mental illness [2, 7].

For many decades sheltered workshops and adult day programs were the environments where persons with significant intellectual, emotional and physical disabilities spent the day. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, group models emerged as an alternative to workshops. In these models, individuals with disabilities worked in business in small groups (e.g., enclaves, mobile work crews) under the supervision of an adult service provider. This approach was designed to serve individuals with the most significant disabilities, those viewed as persistently unemployable. Then, in the early 1980s and into the 1990s, advances in the field led to a better approach (i.e. [12]), in which one individual is served at a time. This is usually referred to as the *individual approach* to supported employment.

Through the years, supported employment has primarily been used to assist individuals with developmental disabilities with employment [13]. Based upon the success of the approach in serving these individuals, the model was later modified and refined to serve other populations, such as individuals with mental illness [3], physical disabilities [9], traumatic brain injury [17], and autism [15, 16].

During this time in 1992, led by Michael Kamp, Christy Lynch, Francisco de Borja Jordán de Urríes, Miguel-Angel Verdugo, Domingo García-Villamizar and other pioneers of European Supported Employment (SE), the European Union on Supported Employment (EUSE) was born. The EUSE led the movement away from group models to the individual placement approach. Although no longer in vogue, the group models served an important purpose by challenging the field to look for better and more dignified ways to support individuals with significant support needs in employment, one person at a time. By the end of the 1990s, use of the individual approach was in full force, and individuals with significant disabilities had another choice. Facility-based programs or group models were no longer the only choice. We know now that individual supported employment is superior in terms of program outcomes [2, 3] philosophy [1] and cost [5, 6].

In the individual approach, a professional vocational rehabilitation specialist (often referred to as a *job coach* or *employment specialist*) provides an array of supports to assist a person with a significant disability with obtaining and maintaining competitive employment in the community. The initial component of the service involves assisting the job seeker with 1) identifying his or her abilities and how these may relate to work, and 2) specifying vocational interests and preferences. Next, job development services geared toward helping the person secure work are offered. Sometimes existing positions within a business are pursued and, at other times, employers may be approached about creating a specific position for the job seeker. Typically, the employment specialist first meets with an employer to learn more about a business's operations and potential labor needs. Then, when viable opportunities begin to emerge, a meeting may be set up between the employer and the job seeker. At this point the typical pre-employment process begins, which involves completing an application and participating in an interview, all of which is supported by the employment specialist. The level of involvement will vary from business to business and is dependent on the skill level of the job seeker. If a job is found or developed that is a suitable match for the job seeker and the employer is agreeable, employment is secured.

## 2. Supported Employment (SE) 25 years later

SE emphasizes the benefits of having opportunities for real, integrated work as a primary option [4, 8, 14].

All parties involved benefit from competitive employment. Such employment provides the individual with a disability a real job, benefits, and the dignity that arises from gainful employment.

With SE, the employer gets a good employee and receives specialized support for job acquisition and retention. The family is able to see the newly employed family member in a fully competent role in the workplace. Finally, taxpayers spend less money than they would to support the individual in a segregated day program. However, several questions remain: Why do the vast majority of individuals with intellectual, physical, psychiatric, and sensory disabilities remain in segregated day treatment programs? What values are service providers and advocates operating under?

The answers to these questions lie partially in the inability of advocates and people with disabilities to adequately coordinate their collective efforts to increase employment opportunities. Adult service systems using segregated services remain deeply entrenched as they have for decades. Changing this way of providing services is extremely difficult, particularly in times of reduced funding resulting from a recessionary economy. Hence, there is an overwhelming necessity to market the positive attributes of SE intended to serve people with significant disabilities. Table 1 provides a brief description of nine values that have guided SE efforts since the early 1980s.

These values mirror themes such as presumption of employment, person-centered control, wages, supports, interdependence, and social connections within the community: These are the underlying values that should be reflected in a quality employment program for people with significant disabilities. It is only with a clear vision and an articulated set of core values that individual organizational members are able to consistently make decisions and conduct business in a manner that 'over time' stays true to the mission of the organization.

Although SE has been in place for more than 25 years, people and organizations still struggle with who should receive services. The federal legislation is clear that SE is for individuals with the most significant disabilities who

- Are in need of ongoing supports
- Have no or an interrupted work history
- Have an intermittent employment record

There has been confusion over the term *significant disability*, because different programs and services define these terms in multiple ways. For example, could someone with a master's degree have a significant

Table 1  
Supported employment values

Values	Values clarification
Presumption of employment	Everyone, regardless of the level or the type of disability, has the capability and right to a job
Competitive employment	Employment must occur within the local labor market in regular community businesses
Self determination and control	People with disabilities must choose and regulate their own employment supports and services, which will ultimately lead to career satisfaction
Commensurate wages & benefits	People with disabilities should earn wages and benefits equal to that of coworkers performing the same or similar jobs
Focus on capacity & capabilities	People with disabilities should be viewed in terms of their abilities, strengths, and interests rather than their disabilities
Importance of relationships	Community relationships both at, and away from, work leads to mutual respect and acceptance
Power of supports	A conviction that people with disabilities need to determine their personal goals and receive assistance in assembling the supports necessary to achieve their ambitions
Systems change	Traditional systems must be changed to support self determination, which is vital to the integrity of supported employment
Importance of community	People need to be connected to the formal and informal networks of a community for acceptance, growth, and development

psychiatric disability? The answer is yes, and much of this confusion has been simplified in the past few years with adult service organizations such as mental health/intellectual disability and vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies accepting proof of a significant disability from Special Education Services and/or the U.S. Social Security Administration's (SSA) Disability Determination.

Still, issues persist when one is considering an individual's intermittent work history. An example is an individual who works for 3–4 months, is not successful, drops out of the employment market, and then comes back several months later. For some individuals, this pattern repeats over and over. Essentially, the individual is good at selling himself or herself but is unable to keep a job. This pattern defines what is meant by an intermittent work history. Individuals with this work history are appropriate for SE, because they need support in selecting a job and identifying the right combination of workplace supports.

### 3. Competitive employment

There also has been some confusion related to what is meant by *competitive employment*. This confusion often occurs when organizations approach businesses and attempt to “sell” an employer or offer ideas that are not in the potential employee's best interest, generally done to secure a quick placement. *Competitive employment* is defined as

- Full-time or part-time consistent with the individual's choices

- Commensurate wages — at or above minimum wage
- Benefits commensurate with those of co-workers in the same business setting

The definition of what constitutes competitive employment has changed over time. In the initial legislation, the 1986 Rehabilitation Act Amendments [10, 11], competitive employment was defined as a job that involved 20 hours or more of employment. The reference to a specific number of hours of employment for SE was dropped when the regulations were amended in the early 1990s. It was hoped that, by dropping the hour regulation, the number of individuals with the most significant disabilities in the workplace would increase. In fact, the opposite had happened. It is easier to obtain a 5-hour-a-week job versus a 30 or 40-hour-a-week position. In addition, when the hour regulation was dropped, there was also the expectation that an individualized plan would be developed to gradually increase total hours worked. All too often, this has not occurred.

Competitive employment also involves payment of commensurate wages at or above minimum wage. Negotiating employment at subminimum wages for any individual with a disability is unacceptable. This belief is based on the ability of SE programs to effectively match an individual's interests, preferences, and support needs to the labor needs of community businesses. Organizations have to be clear on their values. If ‘over time’ an individual is unable to perform the essential functions of his or her job, the preferable option would be to secure a better job match within the same or another business setting rather than consider the payment of subminimum wages.

#### 4. Long-term support services

The final component of the SE definition is the concept of continuous support services, which is referred to as long-term supports. Long-term supports is the component of the SE definition that makes this service unique among a variety of service models. This requires an ongoing commitment from the SE service provider to the employee with disabilities throughout his or her job tenure. Long-term support services include the provision of specialized support or assistance to the employee with a disability either at or off the job site at least twice per month for as long as the person remains employed. Once the employee has become stabilized on the job, the employment specialist continues to provide, at a minimum, twice-monthly contacts. The number and focus of these contacts are individually tailored to the needs of the employee. The services can occur at or away from the job site. Exactly how services are delivered will be directed by the employee. Many individuals with psychiatric disabilities and brain injuries, who are independent in performing their job duties, seem to struggle with employer or co-worker relationships. These individuals often request that support services be provided away from the job site to reduce the stigma of having an employment specialist. Ultimately, the employee will drive this process with the employment specialist respecting the individual's concerns and wishes.

With this special issue we get a rare glimpse into what supported employment looks like in the 21st Century in Europe and Australia. These are only a small selection of examples of course. There will be many more to follow in the 20th Annual meeting of the EUSE in Dublin, Ireland in June 2013. Currently, we can see progress with more and more persons with significant disabilities coming into the labor force for the first time. We must keep our efforts strong and focused.

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