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More Than Just A Job: Person-centered Career Planning

Abstract

[Excerpt] Person-Centered Career Planning is an approach to career development that helps people with disabilities develop and realize their dreams. It uses job seekers' dreams, goals, personal preferences, interests, and needs as the cornerstone of the career planning process. The bottom line of Person-Centered Career Planning is to help people figure out what they want to do, and help them organize a plan to get there. Person-Centered Career Planning focuses on identifying what the job seeker wants to do rather than skills and limitations he or she may have. It does not have to involve a big meeting, nor is it only for people with the most significant disabilities. People with all kinds of experiences can benefit from identifying their interests, preferences, and needs in career development.

Keywords

person-centered planning, disability, workforce planning, employment, career development

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MORE THAN JUST A JOB: PERSON-CENTERED CAREER PLANNING

COLLEEN CONDON, KRISTIN FICHERA, & DANIELLE DREILINGER

**PERSON-CENTERED CAREER PLANNING:
WHAT IS IT?**

Person-Centered Career Planning is an approach to career development that helps people with disabilities develop and realize their dreams. It uses job seekers' dreams, goals, personal preferences, interests, and needs as the cornerstone of the career planning process. The bottom line of Person-Centered Career Planning is to help people figure out what they want to do, and help them organize a plan to get there.

Person-Centered Career Planning focuses on identifying what the job seeker wants to do rather than skills and limitations he or she may have. It does not have to involve a big meeting, nor is it only for people with the most significant disabilities. People with all kinds of experiences can benefit from identifying their interests, preferences, and needs in career development.

IN THIS BRIEF, YOU WILL LEARN TO:

- ⌘ View career planning as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event.
- ⌘ Develop a job seeker-focused, job seeker-directed orientation to career planning.
- ⌘ Build careers around the personal preferences and aspirations of job seekers.
- ⌘ Include job seekers' personal as well as professional support networks in career planning.

WHY DO YOU DO IT?

Good career planning, not just "job placement," is essential for people to find jobs that work for them. Everyone knows that a good-quality job match is necessary for a person to succeed. It is not enough to simply "place" someone in a job. Employment specialists must work with job seekers to see what is important to them in a job and work with them 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 primary director of his/her career. If the wants, needs, abilities, and dreams of the job seeker are not taken into account during job development, it is likely that the job seeker will not stay in the position that is found. Person-Centered Career Planning can improve job satisfaction and retention: When a job seeker is the driving force behind the career plan and job search, they will find a job that works for them and stay in that job longer!

A job means many things to many people, extending beyond a way to earn money and be productive. For most people a job is also a vehicle for greater access to community participation, personal relationships, and enhanced 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, one that encourages change and growth. 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 their 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 someone is 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.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

Person-Centered Career Planning may involve many people or just a few. However, the involvement of a network of trusted people is usually a key component of the career planning and decision-making process. The job seeker works with the employment specialist to identify who might be helpful to involve, and the job seeker has the final say in deciding who participates and how.

WHEN DECIDING WHOM TO INVOLVE, THERE ARE A FEW KEY QUESTIONS TO 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?

Family members, friends, professionals, and employers might be involved, but it will be different for everyone. 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.

HOW DO YOU DO IT?

Many of us engage in career planning more or less haphazardly and with varied success. The involvement of a network of people whom we trust and care about is usually a key component of our career planning and decision-making process. The process described below is a more formal version of what anyone might use in making major career decisions, but it is a very helpful process for anyone seeking employment.

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

1. ORGANIZING RESOURCES
2. FIGURING OUT WHAT MAKES A JOB A "GOOD" JOB
3. CHOOSING A JOB
4. ESTABLISHING A LIFELONG PROCESS OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

ORGANIZING RESOURCES

1.

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 be a large gathering with numerous family members, friends, and professionals in attendance. For others it will be a series of individual meetings with an employment specialist or phone calls to key individuals in their lives.

FIGURING OUT WHAT MAKES A JOB A "GOOD" JOB

2.

The first task should be to develop a profile of the activities, likes, and dislikes of the job seeker at home, work, school, and recreation. The employment specialist will need to gather information such as what choices the job seeker has made, why they made those choices, what has influenced them, and why they liked or disliked certain activities. Many times the answers to these questions are not obvious, so the employment specialist needs to be ready to probe with many questions.

Every individual should be given the opportunity to dream. Many ideas can come from a dream. When it comes to working, people should be encouraged to reach for the stars; then their dreams can become the starting point for career exploration. Talking with people about their dreams 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 profile that was developed and try to tie them together into coherent standards for jobs. Many times job seekers' interests, likes, dislikes, and dreams are ignored in favor of skills, aptitudes, and learning assessments. Employment specialists need to attend to the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of job seekers as the starting point for job development. At this point, begin to brainstorm ideas about possible jobs, tasks, locations, and contacts anyone might have.

Last, it is still important to look at possible barriers to succeeding in the kinds of jobs that were listed. The point of this is not to eliminate jobs from consideration but to "get a leg up" on solving problems that need attention in order to achieve a successful placement. Some barriers will almost always be identified; that is why people with disabilities come to us for assistance rather than getting a job on their own.

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. He then 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 asked *why*. What appealed to her about rebuilding the city underwater? Why did she want to be the mayor? What did being a mayor mean to Sara? What lay behind her dreams?

After talking and exploring together, Joe and Sara realized what her dream "meant": Sara loved politics, and she was unhappy with her weight. After speaking with her mother (with Sara's permission), Joe found out a few key things: When Sara was swimming in the ocean she did not feel as self-conscious about her weight. Her brother had worked in a senator's office while in college, and Sara had been intrigued by it. Joe realized that Sara's tight work area at the workshop made her uncomfortable; she would be more comfortable if she could spend all of her time underwater.

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 dreams.

CHOOSING A JOB



Once job development efforts have resulted in a possible job match, the job seeker and employment specialist use the information to decide whether that job meets the goals outlined. Since the career planning process is intended to be used over an extended period, you can also use this analysis phase to examine whether a current job still meets a job seeker's needs.

People make compromises all of the time in life choices, and job choices are no different. Also, 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 "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, as well as the ability on the part of the service provider to give advice while respecting the job seeker's ultimate responsibility to make his or her own life choices and compromises.

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN DECIDING WHETHER A JOB IS A GOOD 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 them get the skills?
- How will they get this training?

Justin—Exceeding Everyone's Expectations

Justin had been out of high school for two years and was working at a local fast food restaurant. Everyone in his life 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 an office job was not realistic. After begging for a chance to learn how to use computers, Justin was 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 and only typed eight words per minute with 70% accuracy. A team meeting was held to determine Justin's next step.

Attending the meeting were Justin, his father Pete, 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 obviously 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 everyday, to commute into Boston, 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 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. She 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 learned working at the restaurant: time management, customer service, working in a fast-paced environment, and the ability to respond to immediate needs and handle 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.

ESTABLISHING A LIFELONG PROCESS OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

4.

If we are committed to career planning as an ongoing process, evaluation is not the ending but the beginning of a feedback loop. Employment specialists need to develop structures that encourage and enable job seekers to reevaluate their current employment situation and move on to other job options when desired. Traditionally, job seekers 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 regularly scheduled intervals or in response to specific job seeker/family requests, is meant to answer the following questions:

- Have things changed for the job seeker, his/her significant others, or in the job?
- Is the job seeker dissatisfied, bored, or having concerns with his/her job?
- Is the employer dissatisfied or having concerns with the work performance of the job seeker?

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, it is important that regular reviews take place since it is highly likely that changes will occur. If the answer to any of the above questions is "yes," the reasons need to be analyzed. If the job seeker and other interested people decide a job change is needed, then it's time to repeat the career planning process. Remember the obvious: People's likes, dislikes, hopes, dreams, and aspirations change over time. At a minimum, should a job change or modification be required, then the job profile and standards should be quickly reviewed with the job seeker and the other members of the career planning group. The composition of the career planning group will probably change over time as the job seeker expands his or her network of contacts and as members' professional roles change.

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. 2000, TRN, Inc.*
- **The Career Guide for Creative and Unconventional People.** *Carol Eikleberry, Ph.D. 1995, Ten Speed Press.*
- **What Color Is Your Parachute: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters & Career-Changers.** *Richard N. Bolles, 2002, Ten Speed Press (updated annually).*
- **Job Search Handbook for People with Disabilities.** *Dr. Daniel J. Ryan. 2000, Jist Publishing.*

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.
- **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)

- **Starting with Me: A Guide to Person-Centered Planning for Job Seekers.** *Tools for Inclusion, July 2002, Order #TO14*
- **Stories of Success: Using Networking and Mentoring Relationships in Career Planning for Students with Disabilities and Their Families.** *Tools for Inclusion, February 2001, Order #TO12*
- **Networking: A Consumer Guide to an Effective Job Search.** *Tools for Inclusion, January 1999, Order #TO7*

ICI OFFERS TRAINING AND CONSULTATION ON PERSON-CENTERED PLANNING AND OTHER JOB DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT STAFF AND JOB SEEKERS.

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The ICI publication *Starting with Me: A Guide to Person-Centered Planning for Job Seekers* lays out a step-by-step process for consumers who may not have experience finding jobs.

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