

FROM SCHOOL TO THE WORKPLACE

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This article presents recommendations for planning and setting up an effective transition programme for students with learning disabilities. A case is made for replacing assessment practices to those of vocational profiling. Recommendations are made regarding putting a transition team together and the need for the team to be trained in a common methodology in the area of supported employment. Most professional efforts have previously focused on academic preparation. This article focuses on life skills, community functioning and vocational preparation for future employment for students with special needs. Much work needs to be done to ensure a smooth pathway from school to the workplace and this requires team effort. Areas covered in this article include a brief history of transition and supported employment, team requirements, effective planning, the vocational profile, job analysis, work preparation and work experience. The author has over twenty-five years of experience in the field of supported employment and is a recognized authority in this field.

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Through no fault of their own parents, teachers and day care workers fail to bring out the true potential of people with an intellectual disability. From childhood to young adult, parents rely heavily on teachers of special education when assessing the development of their children. At the same time, with the best of intentions, the teachers are unable to give quality teaching techniques due to the number of pupils in their class. They are unable to give the much needed one to one tuition, and the one to suffer is the person with the disability. For most students with special needs the future upon leaving the education system is a place in either an adult training centre or a sheltered workshop. Social workers and disability professionals due to their heavy caseload are also unable to give the parent the much needed guidance and support they need. The end result is the person's development is stunted and their true potential goes unrealized. When they leave the education system they face a future of segregation with their true potential unrealized.

To avoid this scenario organizations have to ensure there is an effective transition programme in place which will allow transition from school to the

workplace to become a reality. Although the issue of transition came later in the vocabulary of Supported Employment it has been realized that this is a priority and should be addressed early to avoid institutionalization for students with learning disabilities. Transition can provide an experience into the world of work and also allow employers to see the potential of future employees.

For most students with learning disabilities leaving school there are two options, one, stay at home, or two, apply to attend a sheltered workshop. Both of these options can be avoided if there is a comprehensive supported employment programme in place. All Supported Employment programmes should have a member of their team who will specialise in transition and work experience. Findings have shown that unless people are exposed to the different types of work available within the community they will be at best restricted in their direction of vocational choice. Job matching is a crucial element of Supported Employment and transition and together with work experience can help people make a more informed choice.

In many parts of the world Supported Employment has been around for a number of years and many lessons have been learnt and continue to be learned. When SE was first introduced in the UK in the mid-1980s emphasis was placed on helping people who attended Adult Training Centres to integrate into society through the medium of open paid employment. This was hampered somewhat by the participants' lack of knowledge regarding what vocational areas were open to them. This led to the development of work experience officers being appointed within SE teams. As more and more people were exposed to the world of work successes started to blossom and centres saw their numbers drop as people took up employment. One neglected area in the early days was that of transition for school leavers. Students with LD of school leaving age either took up places in colleges of further education or started to fill the spaces now available at the Adult Training Centres. Hence integration was again delayed due to lack of vocational knowledge being given whilst these students were at school.

An important part of any SE programme is to be aware of, and plan for, young people with learning disabilities, so that when they leave school they can improve their prospects of genuine lasting employment and social inclusion. This can be done by providing support within the education system from the Supported Employment team. Together with teachers, parents and local employers, students can learn about the world of work with its rules and expectations. As well as benefiting the student, parents can see the possibility of a future for their sons and daughters. Employers will be exposed to people with disabilities and realise that given the correct training and support these individuals can become important members of the workforce. Failure to address this important piece of work will see young adults with LD continuing to either stay at home or enter a sheltered workshop with many such establishments offering an under-stimulating environment where employment opportunities are at best limited.

To achieve the goal of employment, structures need to be in place which allow a flow through system from school/college to employment. The transition team should be made up of teachers, parents and job coaches. During the last two years of education an outreach scheme should be introduced. Plans should be developed for students in the transition phase; teachers should provide allocated slots to discuss with students the different types of employment available. Slide shows and films on different types of jobs should be shown and discussions take place around what the various jobs entail. The job coaches would also have an important role to play in this part of the programme. They would liaise with various employers to negotiate potential work experience and take people on outside visits to employers and provide students with supported work experience. Towards the end of the programme the transition team along with the persons and their parents would start to carry out the process of vocational profiling to ascertain the student's vocational preferences. Once completed this should be passed on to a member of the SE team whose role is to seek appropriate employment for his/her clients based on the profile findings. If this kind of service is put into practice we will see a flow from school straight into employment thereby bypassing the danger of institutionalisation offered by many sheltered workshops and day care centres.

Obviously for the transition teams need to work in unison; training would have to be provided to all involved, so that team members understand and follow a common methodology which would enhance success. Transition needs to be carried out in a committed and professional way and not on an ad hoc basis. Commitment is needed from all involved in the process.

People involved with employment issues for the learning disabled should start to think about putting structures in place to address the transition from school to employment. This can help future generations from becoming institutionalised and provide a valued pathway to integration. The work should be carried out by professionals familiar with learning disabilities. The focus should be on the individual's strengths and weaknesses as they relate both to the training needed for work and as would be found on the job. The task then is to focus on the strengths while trying to compensate for the weaknesses. This is where members of a supported employment team, teachers of special education and parents can really work together to implement effective plans. When a transition programme is done right, being successful at work is definitely within the reach of students with special needs.

As mentioned earlier, Supported Employment/Systematic Instruction (SE/SI) was introduced in the UK in the mid-1980s and has been successfully used as a training tool to help both adults and students with special needs integrate through the medium of open employment opportunities. It provides a common structured methodology which can be used by all involved in the transition process, such as parents, teachers and job coaches. The model uses the following format.

- Effective planning
- Development of a vocational profile describing needs, skills and preferences concerning future employment opportunities
- Non discriminatory assessment of the applicants ability to perform on the job
- Periods of work experience
- Detailed job analysis
- Provision of community functioning skills
- Enhancement of self help skills

Effective Planning

The effective planning stage should involve the complete transition team, parents, teachers and job coaches. Several questions need to be addressed and answered positively by the team:

- Is there a solid commitment throughout the team to the concept of integrated employment for all people with disabilities?
- Are team members agreeable to undertake SE/SI training to ensure a common methodology?
- Set aims and objectives
- Definition of roles and responsibilities.
- Has the team developed a strong philosophical operating statement that describes how the students served are to be treated and represented?
- Are job coaches prepared and willing to work in a variety of work settings?
- Does the team have the commitment to facilitate nonwork areas of need that affect their future success at work?

This planning stage will form the strong foundation on which future service provisions can be developed and maintained. This is therefore a crucial stage and should be completed and agreed by all before the next stages commence. Roles can be defined i.e. self help and community living skills (parents, siblings, care givers), education and an introduction into work (teachers of special education) and work experience (job coaches from the supported employment service).

Vocational Profiling

Traditionally information about people with learning disabilities has been derived from standardized assessment procedures. In most cases, rather than describing the needs, skills and preferences of the persons being assessed, these evaluations turned up negative responses. They showed more than often who was *not* “employable.” Because supported employment assumes the employability of all persons with a disability, the bulk of the information obtained by such evaluations borders on being useless.

What job developers really need to know about the people they are to represent can be more easily and more effectively discovered through the development of the vocation profile. This is a narrative description of the relevant skills, needs preferences and experiences of each unique individual to be employed. Interviews are held (with the individual's permission) with families or caregivers, friends, teachers, in fact anyone who has played a part in the person's life. Records are reviewed and the person's leisure activities and interests are observed. At the end of the profile information gathering a profile meeting is held. This meeting will involve all who have had an input into the vocational profile. This gives a detailed picture of the needs, skills, likes, dislikes and preferences of an individual that serves as a guide for potential job matching. The profile also acts as a guide to any aids or adaptations that may be needed when negotiating work experience placements for the students in the transition programme.

Work Experience

This is an area where students can learn about the world of work and the various vocational opportunities open to them within the community. Individuals or small groups can be shown the different types of jobs which can later be discussed at school. Individual short term placements can be made with local employers. The person is accompanied to the work experience placement by the designated job coach who stays with the person teaching them the skills required to perform the tasks identified by the employer. Work experience has the following main benefits:

1. It exposes the person with the disability to the various jobs available and helps them to make an identified vocational choice.
2. Employers are introduced to people with learning disabilities and can see their potential as future employees.
3. Employers are exposed to the concept of supported employment along with all of its various support structures.

Work experience is a valuable tool in the transition process and can be very useful in increasing the student's vocational knowledge. Placements should be time limited with a full report being made available to the team on completion.

The Job Analysis Process

Before a student starts a work experience placement the job coach needs to spend time at the worksite to carry out a detailed job analysis of the employer's requirements. Job coaches must be completely aware of all of the various job components. By spending time at the workplace the trainer can observe the company procedures, participate in the typical work routines, learn from and about co-workers and supervisors, perform the required tasks and plan effective

training strategies for when the referred student starts their work experience placement. All aspects of the work experience placement need to be taken into account i.e. the main core routines and the other routines such as clocking in and out, observing break times, social codes and expected behaviour, in fact all that goes on in a working day. Whilst carrying out the job analysis the job coach can also observe co-workers to see who would act as a good natural support during the work experience placement.

Job analysis serves the following purposes:

- It serves as a training platform for facilitating successful work experience placements for the student.
- It ensures training at its highest standard.
- It ensures that the job coach is fully aware of all the needs of the employer and to put effective training strategies into place based around the needs of the student involved.

The on-site trainers job analysis objectives are to:

- Develop an effective format for capturing all the components of the job.
- Finalizing a comprehensive training plan based on all the information collected during the job analysis.
- Develop good relationships and lines of communication with co-workers, supervisors and the employer which are necessary before the work experience placement takes place.

Once the job analysis is completed the job coach should show it to the employer to ensure that all areas are covered correctly. The final stage is to cross reference the job analysis with the vocational profile to ensure all aspects are covered.

Community Functioning and Self Help Skills

This is an area where teachers and parents can both have an input. Information gathered during the vocational profile will have highlighted areas which need to be addressed. Typical topics could be:

- Personal hygiene
- Dressing skills
- Communication
- Social behaviour
- Road safety
- Use of public transport
- Social interaction with the community

At school the teachers can also work on interview techniques. This can be done through role play. Parents can look at improving community functioning. Each member of the transition team has a vital role to play if we are to succeed in

achieving the goal of social integration through employment. Based on the information gathered on the profile the team should delegate tasks to the relevant team members to be worked on. If all members have undergone training in transition then the pathway to inclusion is made more easily and effectively.

Access to an appropriate range of educational and effective transition planning is essential for enabling people with learning disabilities to achieving their potential. Recognising the importance of employment whilst still at school is critical. Ensuring effective individualised transition planning and implementation from education to employment could have a dramatic and long lasting effect on the life of the student with learning disabilities.