

DISCUSSION PAPER:
PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYMENT
FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

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Introduction

Over the past decade the world of work, and the educational requirements of its workforce, have changed dramatically. Advancements in technology and changes in the economy have shifted employers' attention from long-term, highly focused, technically-trained workers to those who are transitory, adaptable, possess interpersonal and critical thinking skills, and have a postsecondary degree (Grzeda, 1999; *Ladders of Opportunity*, 2001). These changes in the expectations of employers means that workers today must be more highly educated than were the workers of yesterday. They must also be focused on work as a career path or process, which demands constant attention to the development of new skills, adaptability to new roles, and the pursuit of life-long learning (Grzeda, 1999; National Council on Disability, 2000, November; Orpen, 1994; Romaniuk & Snart, 2000; Zheng & Kleiner, 2001).

For individuals with disabilities, the changing world of work offers both new opportunities and new challenges. Advancements in technology, when matched with proper access to this technology, has made it possible for many individuals with disabilities to access careers that may have previously been closed to them (Burgstahler, 2002). However, the demand for flexible, career-orientated, highly educated workers will create additional barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities if the current transition process from secondary school to post-school environments does not take into account these new realities of the workplace.

In light of persistently poor employment and postsecondary education participation for individuals with disabilities, there has, in fact, been increasing attention in the last several years to how to improve the secondary school to post-school transition process for youth with disabilities. It has become apparent that there is a need to focus policy and practice not only on a student's achievement in secondary school, but on the role of secondary school in preparing students to achieve their aspirations and a high quality of life after secondary school (Benz & Kochhar, 1996; National Council on Disability, 2000, November; Stodden, Dowrick, Stodden, & Gilmore, Submitted). Thus, "post-school outcomes" has become the new buzz-word in educational circles.

There is a need to ensure that "outcome" does not become a dead-end in and of itself. In preparing youth with disabilities to achieve "positive" outcomes, we need to ensure that we are preparing them to achieve the same outcomes as their non-disabled peers. In order to do this, it is necessary to consider the realities of what all students face when they exit secondary school. If we expect individuals with disabilities to participate in the

world of work, then we need to prepare them to have a life-long career with possibilities for change and advancement, not just a job that achieves an “outcome” for the system but little reward for the individual.

This paper discusses the issues surrounding preparing youth with disabilities for professional employment, employment that is part of a life-long career path rather than a stagnant outcome. The paper defines professional employment and discusses it in the contexts of secondary preparation, postsecondary education, and employment settings. The overall premise of the paper is that in order for individuals with disabilities to be engaged in professional employment, they must have full access to secondary, postsecondary, life-long learning and employment opportunities that foster career preparation and development.

Meaning and Value of Professional Employment

Current Status of Employment for Individuals with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities are significantly less likely to be employed than are individuals without disabilities. In fact, data from the U.S. Census shows that only 49% of individuals with disabilities are employed versus 79% percent of individuals without disabilities (U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 2000). The employment rate for individuals with cognitive impairments and significant disabilities are even lower (Kiernan, 2002).

There is a lack of statistical information that compares individuals with and without disabilities in terms of the kinds of employment they are engaged in, retention rate, job satisfaction, and progression through a career path or career change. However, the literature suggests that individuals with disabilities are **less likely** than are individuals without disabilities (a) to be engaged in professional, rather than menial, labor, (b) to retain a position once it is achieved, (c) to be satisfied with their work or career progress, and (d) to change jobs or career paths in order to explore new interests or opportunities (Kiernan, 2002; Thompson, 1994; Wehman, Revell, & Brooke, April, 2002). In sum, many individuals with disabilities, even if they are employed, are not necessarily engaged in “professional” employment constituting a chosen career path with opportunities for development and advancement.

What is “Professional” Employment and “Career Development”?

“Professional employment” is more than just “employment” or “work.” While work is essentially an outcome to be achieved, professional employment can be viewed as participation within a career pathway that includes initial and continuous opportunities for training, and preparation for employment advancement throughout ones lifetime (Grzeda, 1999; Orpen, 1994; Romaniuk & Snart, 2000; Thompson, 1994; Wehman et al., April, 2002; Zheng & Kleiner, 2001). Just because individuals are employed does not mean that they are engaged in career paths that will bring them opportunities for growth, advancement, improved financial standing, and job and life satisfaction.

“Career development” is a process of working to attain, move and advance along a chosen career track (professional area) or across career areas to new and exciting employment opportunities (Grzeda, 1999; Zheng & Kleiner, 2001). Planning and preparing for professional employment during secondary school and postsecondary school is one means of “career development.” Postsecondary education and lifelong learning are also means of career development. Career development and job preparation are directly related to the attainment of professional employment, and hence quality of life, for all individuals (*Ladders of Opportunity*, 2001).

Another important concept that is related to professional employment and to the discussion throughout this paper is sense of opportunity. A person’s sense of opportunity for achievement in education or employment may be an important difference between a static state of employment and career development. When individuals perceive that there is opportunity for innovation or advancement in their careers, they are more satisfied with their work (Derecho, 1996, March) and have a higher sense of subjective well-being and satisfaction in life (Catsis, 2002, March; Harlow & Newcomb, 1990, July). While sense of opportunity may be a distinguishing factor for professional employment, it may also be a predictor. In adolescence, perception of opportunity predicts educational expectations, which in turn predict educational aspirations and career expectations (Wall, Covell, & MacIntyre, 1999, April). Conversely, perception of limited opportunity is a predictor of adolescent alienation, even more so than socioeconomic status (Han, 1971, March). While most research on perception of opportunity has been conducted in the context of gender and minority differences, it may also be an important factor for individuals with disabilities. Due to the social and physical barriers individuals with disabilities face, low expectations from others, and societal stereotypes, individuals with disabilities may have a lower sense of opportunity than the general public, contributing to lower attainment in education and employment.

Perception of opportunity is affected by external variables. Negative influences include stereotypes, lack of successful role models, and real experienced or observed limits on opportunities (Durodoye & Bodley, 1997, March). Access to education has a positive influence on sense of opportunity. And, as will be discussed further in this paper, it is well established that educational opportunities effect an individual’s chances of obtaining and maintaining employment. Postsecondary education is important for improving peoples’ sense of opportunity because of it’s perceived and real benefits. Postsecondary education gives people a chance to pursue different interests, learn important skills, and interact with others in their chosen field. Other external variables that have a positive effect on perception of opportunity include informal support (York, Henley, & Gamble, 1985, Fall) as well as formal efforts to improve career choice patterns (Dunn & Veltman, 1989, October).

It is important to investigate the impact of perception of opportunity on educational attainment and professional employment for individuals with disabilities, as well as internal and external factors that influence opportunity. This paper identifies some key areas where real opportunity and perceived opportunity can be improved for individuals

with disabilities as they progress from secondary school to postsecondary education to employment.

Role of Secondary Schools in the Preparation for Postsecondary Education, Life-Long Learning and Professional Employment

Current Status of Secondary Preparation

There is increasing concern among special educators, individuals with disabilities and their supporters, and others in the field of disability about the poor educational and employment outcomes of youth with disabilities (Benz & Halpern, 1987; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gajar, 1998; Hasazi, Gordon, & Roe, 1985; National Council on Disability, 2001, June 14; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997; Stodden & Dowrick, 1999; Thurow, 1996; Wagner & Balckorby, 1996b). Within the past twenty years, there has been striking and disturbingly persistent evidence that youth with disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to pursue postsecondary education, and less likely to be employed than are youth without disabilities (Benz & Halpern, 1987; Edgar, 1987; National Organization on Disabilities, 1998; Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997; Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). These poor outcomes exist despite the passage of laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that are supposedly designed to ensure equal access to and participation in society by individuals with disabilities.

The often substandard content of the secondary school curriculum for special education students is one significant barrier to the attainment of postsecondary education and employment goals for youth with disabilities (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Edgar, 1987; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Hatch, 1998; Hocutt, 1996; Rojewski, 1996, 1999). Other factors that may contribute to poor post-school preparation and outcomes are problems with the identification of a student's disability (Thurlow, 2002), and problems associated with the disability support provision process such as failure to provide adequate or appropriate accommodations (Thurlow, 2002), poor use and application of promising technology (Burgstahler, 2002), poor coordination and management of supports and services (Whelley, Hart, & Zafft, 2002) and lack of clarity among professionals and families about necessary supports and accommodations (Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002).

There has also been recent discussion around the issue of self-determination and self-advocacy for youth with disabilities, most notably that many youth with disabilities are not given the opportunity to practice the self-determination and self-advocacy skills that will help them to get ahead after high school (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). It has been proposed that skills in self-determination and self-advocacy are closely linked to career development skills, so a lack of opportunity to practice these skills is of particular concern. These skills include:

1. The ability to plan for the near and distant future;
2. The ability to take control of ones own life;
3. An understanding of the relationship of time and goal attainment;

4. A healthy self-esteem;
5. The ability and willingness to explore careers and opportunities;
6. The willingness to ask questions and seek solutions;
7. The willingness to seek out and use resources, and
8. The willingness to participate in school-based and community-based activities (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer).

On a more positive note, specific factors that have been associated with better preparation for post-school environments for youth with disabilities include (a) direct, individualized tutoring, (b) participation in vocational education classes, (c) participation in community-based work experience programs, and (d) a challenging and relevant curriculum (Guterman, 1995; National Council on Disability, 2000, November; M. Wagner, Blackorby, J. & Hebbeler, K., 1993; M. Wagner, Blackorby, J., Cameto, R. & Newman, L., 1993). These positive factors are among the indicators that point the way towards a need for educators and families to pay greater attention to aspects of the secondary school curriculum, and other opportunities during secondary school, that will impact a student's chances of achieving in secondary school and lay the groundwork for postsecondary and professional success. As discussed in the section below, students with disabilities must have access to opportunities for career development and lifelong learning that are afforded to all secondary school students (HEATH Resource Center, 1991; National Council on Disability, 2000, November).

Link Between Secondary Education, Career Development and Life-Long Learning

Career Development in Secondary School

The issue of career development is one that is important for all secondary school students. It is well recognized that students gain benefits from opportunities in high school such as part-time and summer employment, participation in extra-curricular and community activities, volunteer work, career exploration and counseling, job shadowing, career assessment activities, and mentorship programs (Benz & Kochhar, 1996; Hughes, Bailey, & Karp, 2002, December; National Council on Disability, 2000, November). These opportunities can help students to develop their career interests, obtain hands-on job skills, focus their academic studies, and develop "soft skills" that employees value such as social and other interpersonal skills (Hughes et al., 2002, December; U.S. Department of Labor, 2002).

Career interests are important in giving a student the sense of personal opportunity that they need in order to develop goals for and plan for postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Both a secondary and postsecondary degree can be the gateways to securing jobs and in particular, to securing and maintaining professional employment. There is a clear link between degrees attained, being employed, and employment income (Hoyt, 2001, October; *Ladders of Opportunity*, 2001). Individuals with a high school diploma are more likely to be employed and have higher wages than are individuals without a high school diploma; with an associate's degree more than a high school degree; and with a bachelor's degree more than an associate's degree. As

will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper, postsecondary education and life-long learning are also important for career development throughout an individual's professional career (*Ladders of Opportunity*, 2001; Romaniuk & Snart, 2000). Career development in high school represents the start of a continuum of career development and life-long learning activities that lead to the achievement and retention of professional employment opportunities.

Career Development for Secondary School Students with Disabilities

Despite the importance of career development in high school, many students with disabilities do not have access to specific and general activities that promote this development (National Council on Disability, 2000, November; Stodden et al., Submitted; U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Of particular concern:

1. Lack of academic and other supports and accommodations that enable students to have the time and resources to participate in activities that promote career development.

Academic and other supports and accommodations (i.e. tutoring, exam modifications, access to technology, personnel support, etc.) are important not only for a student's academic success, but for their ability to participate in extra-curricular and community activities, part-time employment or internships, and other career-promoting activities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Students with disabilities often do not receive supports that are appropriate or comprehensive enough for classroom activities, let alone those that would enable them to focus beyond their academics (National Council on Disability, 2000, November; Stodden et al., Submitted). In fact, supports are often contained within a special classroom and/or too highly focused on obtaining single academic skills rather than on overall academic success or participation in other types of activities (Stodden, Jones & Chang, 2002).

2. Low expectations by teachers, career counselors, administrators, families and students themselves about the opportunities that are available to students with disabilities after high-school.

A student's sense of opportunity can be limited by the low expectations of school personnel and family. Many school personnel and families still believe that people with disabilities should not expect to "achieve too much" because of their disability (HEATH Resource Center, 1991; Kerka, 2002a; National Council on Disability, 2000, November). There is a misguided perception that we need to be careful not to "raise up hopes" about postsecondary and employment opportunities because these opportunities are not going to be available to a person with a disability. This perception can give the student a sense of failure before they have even begun to explore their interests and aspirations.

3. Poor preparation and training of high school academic and career counselors about providing career guidance to students with disabilities.

There is concern that many high school career and academic counselors, as well as special education teachers, have a limited approach to career guidance for students with disabilities (Miller, 2000; SPENSE, 2002). Counselors may believe that it is the responsibility of special education teachers and paraprofessionals to provide academic and career guidance to these students. Conversely, special education teachers and paraprofessionals may not have the counseling expertise that is needed to properly guide students. Unfortunately, this means that students with disabilities often go without the academic and career guidance that would help to prepare them for and steer them towards professional careers. Or they receive guidance that does not take into account issues that may be related to their disability, such as how to secure work-related accommodations.

4. Focus on transition and employment as a single, static “outcome” rather than as a life-long process.

Too often the post-school preparation process for students with disabilities, i.e. the IEP process and transition activities, is focused on the student’s achieving a single outcome rather than a continuum of outcomes (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Stodden, Jones & Chang, 2002). Part of the problem is the definition of “successful outcomes.” If obtaining a GED or high school diploma is viewed as a successful outcome, then the preparation process may be viewed as stopping with the completion of high school. However, this view of transition is short-sighted and does not take into account the vision that youth with disabilities should strive to achieve professional employment.

5. Lack of opportunities for students to practice self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

In post-school environments, individuals with disabilities are expected to clearly describe and advocate for the supports they may require in specific learning and work environments. Often youth with disabilities are left to make the transition from secondary school without the necessary knowledge or skills in self-advocacy, self-awareness or self-determination required to accomplish this (Field et al., ; Izzo & Lamb, 2002). During secondary school, youth with disabilities experience a highly prescriptive service system covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in which teachers, professionals and parents often make decisions for them (Stodden, Jones & Chang, 2002). This means that students with disabilities are often simply observers of the IEP and transition process, and do not gain knowledge about their disability, do not have a voice to the development of their goals, do not learn about how to advocate for their support needs, and do not have the opportunity to develop other related skills that are associated with career development (i.e. planning, exploration, using resources, etc.).

Improving Secondary School Preparation and Outcomes

Provision of Supports and Accommodations

Proper supports and accommodations are critical to the secondary success and post-secondary preparation of many students with disabilities (Benz & Kochhar, 1996;

National Council on Disability, 2000, November; Stodden et al., 2002). With proper support, students are more likely to be successful academically, which also gives them the confidence to explore their opportunities and other activities. Secondary students with disabilities should also be provided with supports and accommodations in non-academic contexts (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Many of these opportunities promote leadership and career development. Whether it's joining the French club, volunteering at the local museum, or taking a summer job as a camp counselor, secondary school personnel need to work with students and families to secure the necessary support that the student may need to participate in these activities.

Developing a Sense of Opportunity in Secondary School

Working to raise the expectations of school personnel and families, giving students the opportunity to practice self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and providing students with opportunities to participate in career development activities are all important to developing a student's sense of opportunity (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Secondary students with disabilities should be encouraged to explore their professional interests through participation in a diverse curriculum, participation in the IEP and transition planning process, participation in a variety of non-academic activities, taking advantage of opportunities to take internship and part-time employment positions, and participation in general career development activities that a school might offer such as school to work programs (HEATH Resource Center, 1991; National Council on Disability, 2000, November; U.S. Department of Labor, 2002).

Improving Personnel Development and Training

Secondary school academic and career guidance counselors need to be better prepared to work with students with disabilities (Benz & Kochhar, 1996). Preparation to work with students with disabilities should begin during the professional training process and continue through developing collaborative relationships with special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals, in turn, should be encouraged to work with counselors to ensure that students with disabilities receive benefit from the same career development and counseling activities that are afforded to other students.

Career Development as a Continuum that Starts in Secondary School

Successful outcomes should be viewed in terms of obtaining and advancing within a professional career (*Ladders of Opportunity*, 2001; Zheng & Kleiner, 2001). This means that the post-school preparation process must start with career development in high-school (National Council on Disability, 2000, November) and continue beyond high school to postsecondary education and life-long learning within a career path. An important aspect of achieving this goal is for families and students with disabilities to be paramount in goal setting from the outset in secondary school (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Stodden, Jones & Chang, 2002(Stodden et al., Submitted; U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Students will be much more motivated to succeed at all stages of their career

development if career goals are their own rather than those of a professional (Orpen, 1994; Zheng & Kleiner, 2001). Conversely, professionals and families should respect the goals of students and design supports and transition planning around the achievement of these goals. Policy makers, professionals, families and students should also see career development, including secondary, extra-curricular, postsecondary and employment opportunities, as an ongoing process. Career development will change and evolve during preparation for, and participation in, professional employment.

Role of Postsecondary Education and Life-Long Learning in Career Development

Current Status of Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities

As discussed previously, leadership in the nation's business and education communities have increasingly pointed to the need for highly educated and skilled workers as the nation seeks to succeed in the competitive global economy. Over the last twenty years changes in the nation's labor market have increased the importance of possessing a postsecondary education. Students who continue their education after high school maximize their preparedness for careers in today's changing economy as they learn the higher order thinking and technical skills to take advantage of current and future job market trends. For persons with disabilities completion of some type of postsecondary education, including vocational-technical training, significantly improves their chances of securing meaningful employment. In fact, for individuals with disabilities, there is a stronger positive correlation between level of education and rate of employment than is found in statistical trends for the general population (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001).

Given this important data, there are a number of positive signs and interesting trends in the participation of persons with disabilities in postsecondary education and employment. These signs and trends are evident in numerous studies and documents (HEATH Resource Center, 2001; National Organization on Disabilities, 1998; Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001):

- The percentage of students with disabilities graduating from high school with a diploma has risen slowly but steadily in recent years (51.7% in 1994 to 55.4% in 1998);
- The percentage of adults with disabilities who report completing high school has increased significantly between 1986 and 2000 (61% in 1986 to 78% in 2000);
- The number of students with disabilities dropping out of high school has began to decrease (35% dropped out in 1984, decreased to 31% in 1998);
- The percentage of college freshmen with a disability has more than tripled over the last twenty years (3% in 1978 to over 9% in 1998);
- Learning disabilities are the most common type of disability reported by students in postsecondary education;
- Students with disabilities are more likely to attend two year postsecondary education programs than four year programs – two year programs also provide a

- greater range of supports and services (both disability focused and generic learning supports) than do four year programs;
- More than 50% of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education persist toward a degree or credential;
 - Nearly all public postsecondary institutions enroll students with disabilities (approximately 98% of public institutions, 1998);
 - Most postsecondary education institutions enrolling students with disabilities provide some level of services, supports, or accommodations to assist their access to an education;
 - Younger students with disabilities who have completed lower education during the past twenty years are employed at a higher rate than their older counterparts (59% employed within the 21 – 34 age group, 55% employed within the 35 – 54 age group, 36% of those 55 and older);
 - For adults saying they are able to work, employment rates have gone up over the past 14 years (46% in 1986 to 56% in 2000);
 - Individuals with a disability who earn a bachelors degree do almost as well with employment as do those individuals without a disability (67% of youth with disabilities with a bachelor degree were working full time compared with 73% for persons with a disability holding the same degree).

Despite the above areas of significant progress, a number of gaps, issues, and problems remain for persons with disabilities as they seek to prepare for, access, and succeed in postsecondary education and subsequent employment. Continuing issues include:

- Students with disabilities are less likely than their peers without disabilities to complete a full secondary school academic curriculum, resulting in lower levels of academic achievement and preparation for postsecondary education (differences are most significant in math & science curriculum areas);
- Youth with disabilities drop out of high school at twice the rate of their peers without disabilities (these rates are much higher for youth with significant disabilities);
- Youth with disabilities are less likely than their peers without disabilities to graduate from high school, both with a diploma and with other forms of exit;
- Youth with disabilities are less likely to start postsecondary education than are their peers without disabilities (two years after receiving a high school diploma, 63% of students with a disability had enrolled in some form of postsecondary education, compared to 72% of their peers without a disability);
- Youth with disabilities who start postsecondary education are less likely to retain and complete a degree or certificate than are their peers without disabilities;
- Students with a disability who finish postsecondary education take significantly longer to complete their degree than do their peers without a disability;
- More than 80% of youth with disabilities who attempt postsecondary education require assistance to manage/coordinate their educational and related services;
- Individuals with disabilities are less likely to be employed than individuals without disabilities, across all age groups;
- Working-age adults with disabilities consistently earn less than do their peers without disabilities (1997 median earnings were \$17,700 compared to \$23,700).

During the Fall of 1998, the National Institutes for Disability Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) funded a Rehabilitation Research & Training Center (RRTC) at the University of Hawaii at Manoa to further address the issues facing persons with disabilities as they seek access to and success within postsecondary education and subsequent employment. Phase I of the Strategic Plan of Research contributed to further clarity around a number of barriers facing persons with disabilities seeking to access and participate within postsecondary education, as follows (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports (NCSPES), , 2000, June, 2001):

- The type and range of educational supports and services provided in postsecondary education varies extensively from campus to campus. A two year follow-up study of educational support offerings (2002) indicates that such offerings continue to expand on postsecondary education campuses;
- Educational supports & services offered to persons with disabilities in postsecondary education are not well integrated with instruction – often it is the responsibility of the student to understand and make this linkage;
- Obtaining educational supports & services in postsecondary education requires an understanding of one’s disability needs and the advocacy skills to explain those needs to disability support personnel – often such understanding and skills are not taught in secondary school and the IEP procedural requirements do not include the opportunity for youth to develop these skills.
- Large numbers of youth with disabilities accessing postsecondary education require case management assistance with their education and related support needs;
- Educational supports and services offered in postsecondary education are not “individualized” according to a students needs (as required in lower education), but rather are offered as a menu of services, often associated with disability type;
- Faculty members and other personnel in postsecondary education settings are often unaware of disability needs, have a limited range of differentiated instructional skills, and have low expectations of students with disabilities;
- Technology can be an equalizer for students with disabilities in postsecondary education, yet, youth in secondary school have little opportunity to become aware or obtain technology skills related to their educational support needs;
- There is little awareness of the needs of youth with disabilities in postsecondary education to obtain subsequent employment or to transfer educational supports to the work setting.

Link Between Postsecondary Education, Career Development and Life-Long Learning

Career development and life-long learning values that are learned and reinforced during the secondary and postsecondary education years often follow youth as they progress through their adult employment career – these same values are as important or more important for youth with disabilities who must compete for employment and advancement within and across career fields. These values are supported by the extent to

which youth develop high expectations and “a sense of opportunity”, and the extent to which these characteristics are nurtured by others from childhood to adulthood. Elements of acquiring a postsecondary education and pursuing life-long learning that contribute to the development of these values and behaviors include (Grzeda, 1999; *Ladders of Opportunity*, 2001):

- A sense of opportunity that one can change career fields and employment settings;
- Ability to examine one’s satisfaction with status quo and desire to advance;
- Opportunities to explore academic and career interests and abilities;
- A sense of accomplishment based on ones abilities;
- Development of critical thinking and interpersonal skills, and
- Ability to acquire and apply new skills in a variety of settings.

Improving Postsecondary Education Participation and Outcomes

In order to ensure that postsecondary students with disabilities benefit from their education and are prepared to participate fully in professional employment, there is a need to:

- Establish a minimum level of consistency and quality in the provision of accommodations and supports in postsecondary education.
- Encourage postsecondary students with disabilities to explore a variety of disciplines, career options and career development activities (such as student employment, internships, student service activities, campus and community activities).
- Assist students with coordinating and managing campus and community supports, and establish links between postsecondary and employment supports;
- Encourage students with disabilities to develop self-advocacy skill and advocate for their needs.
- Increase access to assistive technology on postsecondary campuses.
- Increase awareness among postsecondary faculty, administrators, and career guidance personnel about the support needs, opportunities and rights of individuals with disabilities.

Role of Adult Agencies in the Provision of Supports for Professional Employment

Current Status of Professional Employment Support Provision for Individuals with Disabilities

Employment for individuals with disabilities has been an important issue for the past few decades, cumulating into a major government program authorized by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act included the civil rights clause (section 504) upon which many subsequent civil rights laws for people with disabilities, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, were based. While efforts to improve employment outcomes for

individuals with disabilities have seen some progress in the past 30 years, there is still a considerable gap between people with disabilities and people without disabilities.

The current trend in the job market toward mobile, high-tech, adaptable jobs and careers may be further exacerbating obstacles to employment for people with disabilities. In a career world where transition is constant, one job cannot be the end-all outcome for any individual. Transition is not an event with an ending. In today's world, transition is a continual process of learning and adapting. People with disabilities must have their accommodations and employment support adapt with them if they expect to compete in the world of professional employment. Adult agencies and the systems within which they exist must also adapt to today's job market. Rather than closing the case when a consumer obtains one job, services should support career development. People can be prepared to take advantage of changes in their vocation or organization, rather than reacting to problems after the fact. The advantages to supporting career development are a more capable, advancing workforce; better quality of life for individuals; more adaptable and successful employees, and lower unemployment rates. Some ways for adult agencies to support career development are: a) improving opportunities for choice and control for the consumer, b) focusing on person-centered planning, professional employability, and long-term outcomes, c) improving the availability and use of assistive technology, d) improving career development skills beyond initial employment, and e) collaborating with child-focused agencies, secondary and postsecondary institutions, and career preparation programs.

Link Between Supports, Career Development and Professional Employment

The 1994-95 National Health Interview Survey found that 79% of those interviewed without disabilities were working, while only 37% of interviewees with disabilities were working. Studies to explore reasons for this significant gap have found that people with disabilities sense that there is a lack of opportunity for employment (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001). Some of the difficulties that discouraged people with disabilities from looking for work were:

- No appropriate jobs available (52%)
- Lack of transportation (23%)
- No appropriate information about jobs (23%)
- Inadequate training (21.6%)

In order to improve employment rates among people with disabilities, it is necessary to improve actual opportunities, as well as the sense of opportunity that individuals have. Some issues of concern are:

1. The lack of control over choice and information that individuals with disabilities have in adult agencies.

Employment options for people with disabilities have traditionally been limited by the system. The control of resources and programs are typically in the hands of professionals

and bureaucracies, and the choice “recipients” have is whether or not to accept the program (Mank, n.d.). Often an employee with a disability is put into the position of having to accept accommodations that, while adequate for an entry level position, do not allow them to progress on a career path that is typical for employees without disabilities (Callahan & Mank, 1998). Issues of choice and control have been gaining increased attention from people with disabilities, advocates, researchers, practitioners and policy makers, along with the concepts of self-determination, person-centered planning, and coordination of services.

2. Lack of long-term vision for career development and professional employment in adult agency services.

In the context of employment, the focus of assistance provision tends to be upon enabling the employee to perform the tasks that are necessary in order to complete the requirements of their position (Luecking, 2000). The measure of outcome in this case would be whether or not the employee does in fact meet their job requirements, not whether or not the employee has opportunities for career advancement and professional employment with life-long outcomes. A focus on single job-acquisition outcomes instead of training and career development can be limiting for individuals with disabilities. One of the top reasons people with disabilities are discouraged from seeking employment is inadequate training (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001). Employers in both the private and public sectors list lack of related experience and lack of required skills and training as the biggest barriers to employment for people with disabilities (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001).

3. Lack of adequate accommodations and supports

Attempts to balance legal requirements with production costs and employee productivity creates extreme variability in terms of what kinds of accommodations employers will offer employees with disabilities (Hazer, 2000). If it is determined that a company cannot afford specific accommodations or if these accommodations would significantly interfere with the nature of their business, a.k.a. create an “undue burden” (“Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990,” 1993), then it may be left to the employee to either (a) fund an accommodation themselves (or seek funding elsewhere), (b) accept an accommodation that does not entirely meet their needs, (c) give up their employment, or (d) become involved in a time consuming and costly appeals process (Stodden et al., 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 2001). Employers are the first to decide whether an accommodation is reasonable, but they may not be the most qualified to do so. Supervisors’ lack of knowledge about appropriate accommodations is listed as a major barrier to employment for people with disabilities (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001). Inconsistencies in accommodations, negative attitudes that people with disabilities face when trying to acquire, keep, and advance in a job, and lack of convenient public accommodations are also barriers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, September 2001). In particular, lack of transportation was listed as a source of discouragement for job-seekers with disabilities (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001).

4. Lack of skills and training to find and pursue opportunities

As discussed earlier, when youth with disabilities enter the workforce, they are expected to understand their disability, how it impacts their functioning on the job, and what accommodations are necessary (Stodden et al., 2002). It is generally dependent upon the employee to match their goals with their assistance needs and to advocate for the provision of such assistance (Luecking, 2000). Self-advocacy and self-determination are examples of skills that individuals with disabilities need in order to pursue professional employment, and the lack of these skills presents a barrier. (Izzo & Lamb, 2002).

5. Lack of collaboration between agencies

The process of obtaining and managing accommodations and services in order to work and live independently can be overwhelming. People with disabilities often have to seek support from a variety of different sources—such as the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Developmental Disabilities, health insurance, outside funding, the Social Security Administration, the Office of Disability Services, if they are at school, the Center for Independent Living, and their employer or potential employer—in order to manage their lives. The process of applying for different resources, meeting different requirements, and managing supports can be frustrating, conflicting, and time-consuming. Barriers to collaboration, such as ignorance of other systems, reluctance or inability to bypass bureaucratic red tape, and limited financial resources can keep educators, adult service agencies, and employment service providers from providing supports that are actually supportive (Whelley et al., 2002).

The above issues highlight possible reasons for a low sense of opportunity that, coupled with real physical and social barriers, can discourage individuals with disabilities from pursuing professional employment. Efforts to improve professional employment support provision should begin by addressing these issues.

Improving Professional Employment Support Provision

Improving Opportunities for Choice and Control for the Consumer

“Taking control” has been identified as an important contributor to success for any person. For individuals with disabilities it may be even more important because of early experiences where autonomy is undermined (Kerka, 2002b; Sowers, McLean, & Owens, 2002). Individuals with disabilities have the same right as their non-disabled peers to control their lives and their futures (Field et al.). Individuals with disabilities need to be placed in a consumer role, rather than a patient or recipient role, in order to exercise more choice and control of their support resources and plans. Mank (n.d.) highlights some indicators of individualized choice in employment services:

1. Acceptance of the individual as the starting point and driving force in all services and supports.

2. Control of money
3. Consumer empowerment—who owns the solution to the problem
4. Consumer-centered advice, including outside sources of advice.

These indicators are rulers by which to measure the amount of choice and control individuals with disabilities have within the system, compared to the amount of choice and control their nondisabled counterparts have in life. According to this approach, individuals will (Sowers et al., 2002):

1. Have the knowledge to make informed decisions;
2. Have an array of careers to choose from, similar to individuals in their community without disabilities;
3. Receive individualized, ongoing advice and support;
4. Have their own career goals determine the process of employment services;
5. Have individual budgets reflecting their career goals;
6. Have the prerogative to determine which services they will spend their money on, and
7. Contract directly with service providers.

The Community Based Employment Services (CBES) program (Hart, Zimbrich, & Ghiloni, 2001), is an example of efforts to improve choice and control for individuals with disabilities. The program developed a more consumer-based approach to services, allowing consumers more choice and control of money, improving the quality of services through competition, improving collaboration between agencies, reducing service gaps and duplication, and providing for a smoother transition for youth with disabilities. Promising models such as this have led to the prediction that the coming reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act will promote client choice (Field et al.). In such a system, consumers can choose to pursue opportunities for career development and professional employment, rather than simply accepting the package that a system delivers to them.

Focusing on Person-Centered Planning, Professional Employability, and Long-Term Outcomes

While “individualized” services and programs have been encouraged in legislation (“Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,” 1997; “The Vocational Rehabilitation Act,” 1973) since their inception, and expanded in subsequent amendments, person-centered planning has been called a recent “paradigm shift” that requires a change in perspective (Garner & Dietz, 1996, February). Person-centered planning involves a shift from support based on what the system has available to support based on the individual’s strengths and needs (Garner & Dietz, 1996, February; Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003, January). Person-centered processes usually involve gathering teams of people, including professionals and significant friends and relatives, around the focus person to help that person think of dreams, strengths, fears, needs, desired outcomes, and best processes to get there. Planning includes organizing creative and natural means of meeting needs rather than just focusing on the slot in the system to which the person fits. These types of practices have been increasing in popularity, and a simple internet search calls up many

resources for stakeholders (see, for example, Cornell's Person-Centered Planning Education Site: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/tsal/Enable/>). Empirically-based outcomes for person-centered planning are not well established. However, a meta-analysis of self-determination program outcomes, including person-centered planning, described significant gains for the people participating in these programs (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001). Studies included in this analysis reported significant person-centered planning outcomes such as gains in number of preferred integrated activities, age-appropriate functional skills, family participation in IEP meetings, knowledge of service, self, and educational and employment outcomes, family empowerment, etc.

If the provision and management of supports is person-centered, then support for professional employability beyond entry-level employment follows naturally. Continued training specifically for advancement in the type of career consumers desire is a necessary part of professional employment. Formal postsecondary education is an obvious step to advancement in most careers. Certificates of completion, Associate's degrees, Baccalaureate degrees, and graduate degrees increase the earnings of those who receive them, in that order (Grubb). Formal education is an important gateway to managerial advancement (Ladkin, 2000). And training after formal schooling, specifically frequent, short-term training episodes are also associated with higher wages (Marcotte). Lifelong learning opportunities are a vital component of maintaining and advancing in a career in today's information age. This is true for all people.

Improving the Availability and Use of Assistive Technology

Technological advances in recent years have the potential to overcome barriers and improve opportunities for people with disabilities. However, according to Burghstahler (2002), this potential will not be realized unless stakeholders

1. Secure funding;
2. Become more knowledgeable about accessible technologies and their appropriate use;
3. Understand and comply with legal mandates; and
4. Develop appropriate legislation, policies, standards, and procedures that result in maximizing the independence, participation and productivity of individuals with disabilities.

It is important that funds and information are available to ensure appropriate accommodations for individuals with disabilities in the general public and in specific situations. With effective implementation of laws and policies such as the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, effective dissemination of information, and adequate funding, barriers to professional employment for individuals with disabilities may be alleviated. Well-informed employers have more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities (Unger, 2002). Improved transportation options for individuals with disabilities would enable them to pursue employment opportunities that may otherwise be out of reach (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001).

Across systems of support there are many discrepancies in the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, the process of obtaining support and the desired outcomes of support (Stodden et al., 2002). Practices such as resource mapping (Crane & Skinner, 2003; Whelley et al., 2002), in which various resources in the community are collaboratively matched to individuals' needs, may be necessary to overcome these discrepancies until large-scale streamlining is feasible.

Improving Career Development Skills Beyond Initial Employment

One way to look at career development is as a process that coordinates school, family and community resources to facilitate each individual's potential for economic, social, and personal fulfillment (Brolin & Kokaska, 1979), and involves stages such as career awareness, exploration, decision-making, preparation, and placement (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Career development is closely related to the self-determination and self-advocacy skills needed to define and obtain appropriate accommodations in work (Field et al.). Skills for decision-making, self-awareness, and career exploration are important for individuals to make realistic, informed choices (Patterson, Patrick, & Parker, Summer 2000). It is the rehabilitation field practitioner's role to ensure that consumers enter the world of employment with the skills and services necessary to compete effectively in the interview process, in keeping a job, and in developing a lifetime career (National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, 1993). Studies conducted by the Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center in Vocational Rehabilitation have found that interventions for improving the skills and employability of consumers, such as relaxation training, assertion training, conflict management training, and self-management training, were related to improved outcomes such as job-interview performance. Similar efforts to study the effectiveness of skills training interventions should be expanded to long-term outcomes, such as employment maintenance and career advancement. While there are policies and programs that aim at improving transition from school into employment for youth with disabilities, adult agencies often stop short of promoting career development beyond an initial employment outcome. Professional employment requires continued improvement in these skills for individuals with disabilities.

Collaborating with Child-Focused Agencies, Secondary and Postsecondary Institutions, and Career Preparation Programs

Programs that aim to maximize opportunities for professional employment should collaborate with other agencies that serve individuals with disabilities throughout life, rather than waiting until individuals with disabilities have finished their schooling (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). While any youth, with or without a disability, may think about career plans and preferences, they often need guidance and opportunities to explore careers and begin preparing for them. Employers cite lack of related experience and required skills and training as the biggest barriers to employment and advancement for individuals with disabilities (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2001). These issues can be addressed early when adult agencies partner with educational agencies and other programs to improve the skills students need for professional employment in adult life.

Hart, Zimbrich, and Ghiloni (2001) describe Interagency Youth Support Teams (YST), part of an individual support model, that included college and school personnel, youth and family members, Department of Mental Retardation service coordinators, Vocational Rehabilitation counselors, and Independent Living Center staff. These teams used a person-centered approach to improve employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. Whelley, Hart, and Zafft (2002) describe the importance of collaboration at the state and local level, mechanisms for communication between agencies, resource mapping and alignment, and identification of service gaps, and highlight some promising practices for interagency collaboration.

Summary

The most important premise of this paper is that employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities should not be limited by poor preparation, lack of support and low expectations of opportunities. Individuals with disabilities should be able to pursue the same professional careers opportunities that are afforded to individuals without disabilities.

This paper provided an overview of the issues surrounding participation in professional employment by individuals with disabilities. The paper discussed the current status of professional career preparation and development in secondary school, postsecondary school and employment. Several common themes emerged across these environments, including:

1. Individuals with disabilities need better access to career development and life-long learning activities.
2. There is a need to improve the provision and management of supports and accommodations to individuals with disabilities.
3. There is a need to improve the expectations and sense of opportunity that individuals with disabilities have about their immediate professional career options and life-long careers.
4. Self-determination and self-advocacy skills are important to career development and youth with disabilities must be encouraged to develop these skills.
5. Personnel must be more aware of the opportunities and challenges that exist for individuals with disabilities and must be more pro-active about providing academic and career counseling and support services.

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