Research Study #5

Fact Sheet

November 2026

Why Does Supported Employment and Fidelity Matter

What Research Says About Quality, Why Outcomes Remain Uneven, and Why Fidelity Matters

- Employment provides more than income. Research suggests work contributes to identity, autonomy, purpose, social inclusion, and psychological wellbeing for many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).
- Adults with IDD consistently report wanting meaningful paid work and generally prefer competitive integrated employment over segregated options.
- Despite decades of policy initiatives, competitive integrated employment outcomes remain low.

Why Supported Employment Matters

- Supported employment was designed to help people with significant disabilities obtain and maintain competitive integrated employment through individualized supportsdelivered in real workplaces.
- Core components repeatedly identified include person-centered planning, individualized job development, employer engagement, workplace supports, fading, and retention services.

The Central Problem

- Research increasingly suggests the issue is not simply whether supported employment exists, but whether it is implemented with quality and consistency.
- Implementation quality may be influenced by staffing, competencies, turnover, caseloads, transportation barriers, organizational culture, and funding systems.
- Poor implementation may contribute to job loss, reduced confidence, employer distrust, and missed opportunities.

Why Fidelity Matters

Fidelity measures ask whether evidence-based practices actually occurred. Without fidelity data, systems often monitor compliance and billing rather than implementation quality.

Endnotes & References

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The contents of this fact sheet were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number #90RTEM0013). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this fact sheet do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Phase	Goal	ES Role
Information Gathering	Build a relationship with job seeker and identify strengths, interests, preferences, and support needs for employment.	Engage in activities to gather this information, develop a plan for finding employment.
Job Development	Search for and secure employment based on the information gathered.	Develop resume, contact employers, support job seeker in application and interview process.

Benefits of an Employment Specialist?

The information provided above is not an exhaustive list of services that an ES will provide during quality employment services, it provides a basic overview. Working with a skilled ES is more likely to lead to initial and long-term employment success for an individual with a disability. It is becoming increasingly evident that the ES is integral in not only helping the employee learn the essential job tasks they were hired for but also in supporting their social integration into the workplace and providing support to employers who may be brand new to working with individuals with disabilities and service providers. This is particularly true for individuals with significant disabilities who would not otherwise be able to access and maintain CIE.

****Please visit our website or review the Quality Supported Employment Services Handbook for additional information on the importance of the ES and the services they provide.**

References

McDonough, J., Wehman, P., Brooke, A., Ham, W., & Hence, C. (Eds.). (2026). Quality Supported Employment Services: A Handbook for Employment Support Professionals. (2nd.ed.). Virginia Commonwealth University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.

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