



Supporting Integrated Employment Pursuits for Individuals with IDD: Insights from Families

“So they’re building his skill.... I could tell the first day they did it. He came in all pumped up and happy and walking on his toes. It was good. And so just that little bit makes all the difference in the world.”

~Mother of a 25-year-old male with autism

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Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who are employed are making substantial contributions in the workplace—throughout Tennessee and across the country. They are sharing their gifts, talents, and passions in jobs that match their interests and strengths. Parents are encouraging these employment experiences and seeing first-hand the difference it makes in their family members with IDD. Schools and agencies are providing strong instruction and individualized supports that promote success on the job. And employers are benefiting substantially from their commitment to hiring a diverse workforce.



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“I think being able to know how to put a support team together is important because we haven’t done it in a formal way. But if I were to stop and think about it, there are lots of people that play roles in him being able to be successful, it’s not just [him] and me.”

~Mother of a 20-year-old male with an intellectual disability

But there is still much work to be done! Most individuals with IDD who want to work are not provided opportunities to do so.¹ Many families still struggle to envision employment or are uncertain how to pursue it.² Formal educational and disability services do not often aim toward integrated employment. And many employers wonder whether they have the capacity to support a workforce that includes individuals with IDD.³

What will it take to connect more individuals with IDD to a job they enjoy?

Study Overview

We spoke with 60 parents, siblings, and other relatives about the opportunities, supports, and services that would be needed to promote community employment outcomes for their family members with IDD. Through a combination of individual and focus group interviews, we asked a series of questions to elicit their insights and experiences:

1. What do you think would have to be in place to support your family member to access integrated employment? Why?
2. What sorts of support or help do you think your family member would need to be successful in a paid job?
3. Which of these factors do you consider to be most important?

Additional background on the participants and methodology can be found in Project Brief 1.

In this brief, we present an overview of early findings from this qualitative study. Participants were creative and generative in their thinking about ways to make integrated employment a reality for individuals with IDD. Most of the suggestions they shared fell within one of the ten key areas described on page three. (Note that the order in which they are presented does not necessarily reflect their importance or impact.)

1. Winsor, J., Timmons, J., Butterworth, J., Migliore, A., Domin, D., Zalewska, A., & Shepard, J.. (2019). *StateData: The national report on employment services and outcomes*. Institute for Community Inclusion.

2. Gilson, C. B., Carter, E. W., Bumble, J. L., & McMillan, E. (2018). Family perspectives on integrated employment for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 43, 20-37.

3. Song, J., Roberts, E., & Zhang, D. (2013). Employer attitudes toward workers with disabilities: A review of research in the past decade. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 38, 113-123.

Ten Key Areas in Advancing Employment

▶ EXPECTATIONS

Participants emphasized the importance of raising expectations among adults with IDD, families, employers, educators, and service providers so that each can envision employment and will pursue it vigorously.

▶ ATTITUDES

Participants addressed the importance of cultivating mindsets that were marked by flexibility and an openness to new ways of doing things, as well as the need to address the attitudes of co-workers and service providers.

▶ AWARENESS

Participants advocated for informing families, employers, and communities about the benefits of hiring individuals with disabilities, alongside promoting existing employment resources and programs.

▶ PLANNING

Participants proposed better planning processes that were individualized and outlined a pathway to integrated employment.

▶ EXPERIENCES

Participants encouraged increased involvement in work experiences while still in high school, as well as career development experiences (e.g., internships, volunteering) that could help students discover their career goals and gain important skills and dispositions.

▶ INSTRUCTION

Participants identified an array of skills that should be addressed through well-planned instruction in the areas of communication, self-advocacy, self-management, social skills, driving, employment, and independent living.

▶ CONNECTIONS

Participants called for more creative and intentional efforts to capitalize on people's personal networks, strengthen employer outreach, and assist individuals with IDD in their job search.

▶ SUPPORTS

Participants spoke about the power of personalized supports on the job (e.g., adaptations, accommodations, job coaching, co-workers), for families (e.g., advocacy, benefits counseling), and in the area of transportation.

▶ ENVIRONMENTS

Participants explained the importance of connecting individuals with IDD to workplaces that reflect a strong match in the areas of interests, responsibilities, schedules, supports, and inclusivity.

▶ COMMUNICATION

Participants conveyed the need for open communication among families and employers, effective approaches for disability disclosure, and ideas for sharing the strengths of applicants with IDD more effectively.

We will soon begin examining the extent to which the views of participants vary based on characteristics of their family members (e.g., sex, age, disability), the communities in which they live, or other considerations.

Selected Findings

We highlight here just a few key findings emerging from our early analyses of these interviews:

Participants were optimistic about the possibility of integrated employment for their family members and identified very practical steps that would contribute to this important goal.

Although many of the individual suggestions offered by participants may sound simple, the overall solution to this persistent challenge is quite complex.

Promoting integrated employment will require the collective investment of individuals, families, schools, agencies, employers, and communities. The recommendations of participants were not confined to a single stakeholder.

The perspectives people hold directly influence the practices and policies they pursue. The expectations, attitudes, and awareness people have likely influenced the actions they do or do not take.

Practical Implications

Several implications for practice follow from these findings:

Parents, siblings, and other relatives have creative insights into the strategies and supports that can promote employment for their family members with IDD. Educators, providers, and other professionals should seek out their perspectives in this area both in informal situations and meetings to develop individualized education plans, individual plans for employment and person-centered plans.

Interventions aimed at increasing employment outcomes should be multi-faceted and incorporate the strategies suggested across these ten areas.

Local communities should consider how they could work in concert to better integrate services and supports so that individuals with IDD have the very best chance of participating in the workforce.

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