



Barriers to Employment for Individuals with IDD: Insights from Families

“The actual skill of doing the job is never going to be the problem. It is navigating all of the hidden agendas and water cooler talk. And the subtle cues of interacting with a boss that [he] might not quite understand.”

~Mother of 22- year-old son with autism

This research study was supported through funding from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Employment of Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The VCU-RRTC is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant #90RTEM000301-00). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

A good job in the community can have a powerful influence on the lives of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Meaningful work does much more than promote personal and financial independence. It also brings a sense of pride, creates social connections, and enhances well-being. Local employers also benefit from the diverse talents and deep commitment individuals with IDD can bring to the workplace. Not surprisingly, current policy and best practice all aim toward helping individuals with IDD access integrated employment that is aligned to their interests and abilities.¹



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Unfortunately, the majority of individuals with IDD remain unemployed or underemployed. Nationally, more than 80% of youth and adults with IDD are not working.² Moreover, these employment outcomes have not changed in substantial ways for more than two decades.

What stands in the way of meaningful work for these valued members of our communities? What factors converge to limit access to such an important and impactful experience?

Study Overview

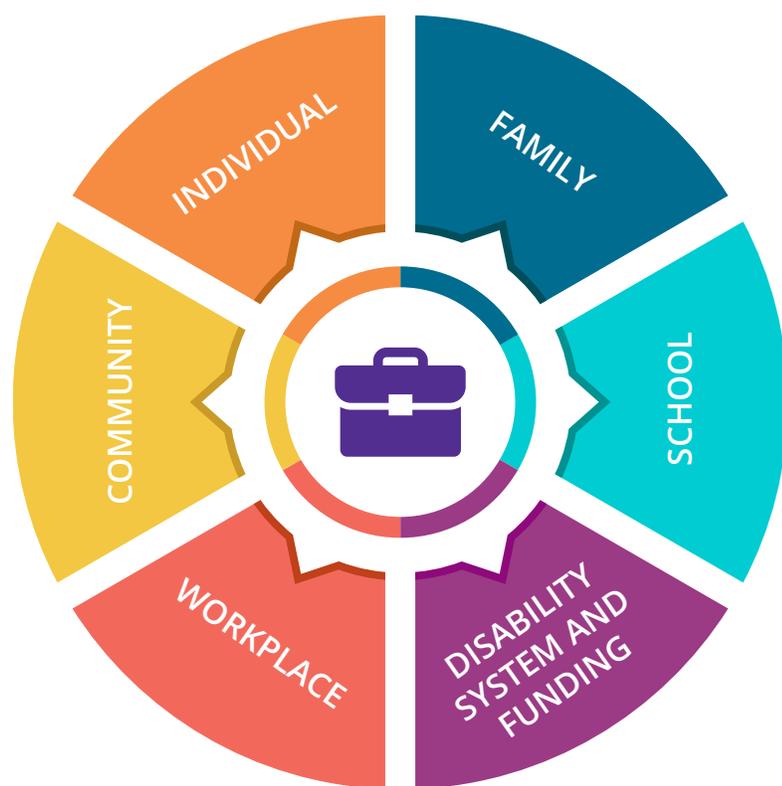
We spoke with 60 parents and siblings about the multiple barriers that coalesce to hinder employment outcomes for their family members with IDD. Through both individual and focus group interviews, we asked a series of questions to elicit their insights and experiences:

1. What things might make it hard for your family member to find or keep integrated employment?
2. Which of these barriers do you consider to be the most challenging? Why?
3. Are any of these barriers considered “deal breakers”?

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

What Factors Serve as Barriers to Integrated Employment?

In this brief, we present an overview of early findings from this qualitative study. Numerous barriers were identified within and across interviews. Most fell within one of the six key areas described below. (Note that the order in which they are presented does not necessarily reflect their importance or impact.)



1. Wehman, P., Taylor, J., Brooke, V., Avellone, L., Whittenburg, H., Ham, W., Brooke, A. M., & Carr, S. (2018). Toward competitive employment for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities: What progress have we made and where do we need to go. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 43(3), 131-144.

2. 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.

► **INDIVIDUAL FACTORS**

These barriers were described by families as emerging from the abilities (e.g., difficulties related to communication, cognitive, physical, sensory, and endurance capacities), skills (e.g., limitations in the areas of social, personal care, self-management, self-advocacy, job search, and other skills), behaviors (e.g., challenging behaviors, safety concerns), or perspectives (e.g., motivation to work, understanding of employment, self-confidence) of individuals with IDD.

► **FAMILY FACTORS**

These barriers related to the capacity or commitment of families to pursue or support integrated employment. Most examples focused on the perspectives (e.g., low expectations, hopelessness, fatigue), knowledge (e.g., of resources, strategies, or parent networks), resources (e.g., absence of a support team, difficulties with navigating benefits), or priorities of parents.

► **SCHOOL FACTORS**

These barriers related to the instruction, services, or supports offered through elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools. Examples included the expectations and preparation of educators, the availability of adequate instruction, the quality of communication with families, and the absence of individualized services.

► **DISABILITY SYSTEM AND FUNDING FACTORS**

These barriers focused on the services and supports available through state- and federally-funded agencies and programs. Key concerns surrounded knowledge of services, access to services, and implementation of services, as well as the attitudes of staff and the quality of their collaborations.

► **WORKPLACE FACTORS**

These barriers focused on the perspectives, practices, and support of local employers. Example issues included the willingness, preparedness, flexibility, communication, and expectations of employers; the attitudes of co-workers and customers; the adequacy of on-the-job supports; and the overall match for the individual with IDD.

► **COMMUNITY FACTORS**

These barriers primarily addressed the opportunities, resources, and attitudes prevalent in local communities. Key concerns related to transportation, the availability of job openings for anyone, and the views of community members.

“Finding the right place, the right people, the people with the patience enough to work with him to make him, to get him there. That’s a tough one to do and I found it pretty tough to find that type of environment for him.”

~Father of a 22-year-old son with autism

Selected Findings

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

Participants readily identified a constellation of barriers that they felt made employment more complex or daunting to pursue for their family members with IDD.

These barriers were attributed to multiple sources, rather than to a single person or program.

Although many barriers received broad affirmation across interviews, each participant emphasized a unique combination of barriers based on their family member with IDD and their specific context.

Although each barrier may have an associated solution, it is the combination and accumulation of barriers that makes this pursuit of employment particularly challenging.

Practical Implications

Several implications for practice follow from these findings:

Families have first-hand experiences that provide valuable insight into both the subtle and substantial barriers to integrated employment that exist in their local community. Their perspectives should be sought more often.

Improving employment outcomes within a particular community will require working together to address the multiple barriers that exist across home, school, work, agency, and community contexts.

Many of the barriers identified by participants reflect longstanding concerns within the field. We must work harder and swifter to remove barriers to meaningful employment.

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Graphic design support provided by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development. vkc.vumc.org