



Meaningful Work for Individuals with IDD: Insights from Families

“I long for her to be getting more intellectual development and challenge at work, to be invited to push the envelope a little bit and see what more she can do.”

~Sibling of 58-year-old sister
with an intellectual disability

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Elevating employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) has been a longstanding goal of research, policy, and practice. Expanding access to the world for work is the right investment for people with disabilities, as well as for their families, area businesses, and local communities. Indeed, many agencies and organizations now track changes in employment rates as a way of determining whether progress is being made toward this goal. For example, schools track employment rates one year after graduation (Indicator 14), vocational rehabilitation tracks closures with successful employment outcomes, and state IDD agencies track the percentage of individuals involved in integrated employment.



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“It was really, I think for her, self-worth and her achievement and her desires... Meaningful would be a job that was according to her interests, her goals, and her gifts, her skills.”

~Mother of a 31-year-old daughter with IDD

Improving overall workforce participation is a critical goal. But it is just as important to consider the quality of the jobs being pursued for individuals with IDD. Some jobs will offer deep satisfaction and reflect a strong fit for a particular person; other jobs will bring discontentment and a sense of incongruity. This portrait of “meaningful work” is likely to look somewhat different for each person. Unfortunately, the subjective dimensions of this objective outcome are often overlooked in discussions of policy and practice. Instead, employment is treated as either working or not working, without attention to the quality of those work experiences.

What might make work especially meaningful for individuals with IDD?

Study Overview

We spoke with 60 parents and siblings about their views on the employment of their family members with IDD. Through both individual and focus group interviews, we asked a series of questions to elicit their perspectives:

1. To what extent do you consider employment to be an important goal for your family member? Why or why not?
2. In your opinion, what would “meaningful” employment (i.e., a good job) look like for him or her?
3. How likely do you think it is for this type of employment to happen for him or her?

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

What Makes Work So Important?

Participants also addressed a range of other reasons they prioritize employment for their family member with IDD. These included:

- It provides purpose and meaning
- It instills a sense of pride and self-worth
- It promotes community involvement
- It furthers independence and promotes self-sufficiency
- It enables other life goals



- It makes them feel like anyone else
- It reflects something they love to do
- It builds confidence and self-esteem
- It creates social connections
- It contributes to financial stability
- It engages and challenges them
- It contributes to a meaningful life
- It brings dignity
- It sparks joy
- It teaches life skills
- It provides learning opportunities
- It offers a venue to meet the needs of others
- It improves overall well-being
- It provides a place of belonging
- It gets them out of the house
- It introduces valued roles

What Aspects of a Job Make it Meaningful?

Participants also described those features of a job that they felt would be important for their family member with IDD. These included:

- Sufficient number of hours
- Provision of a living wage
- A match with their interests

“And the more I’ve thought about it and talked to other people about it, a lot of the reasons we’d want any family member to have employment, apply to our son. Sense of self, sense of identity, sense of accomplishment.”

~Father of 26-year-old male with IDD

- Opportunities for career growth
- An environment that is safe
- The inclusivity of the workplace
- Opportunities for social relationships
- The sense of community
- The availability of adequate supports
- Work they consider to be meaningful
- Like-minded co-workers
- Responsibilities aligned to their abilities
- Appropriately challenging tasks
- Co-workers who are kind, patient, and helpful
- Predictability of the tasks

Selected Findings

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

The views of participants varied widely in response to each of these two questions. There is no single perspective on why work matters and what makes a job most meaningful.

A steady paycheck is important, but it is not all that matters. An emphasis on other less tangible—but no less important—benefits permeated these conversations.

Many participants said they held somewhat different definitions of “meaningful” employment for themselves than they did for their family member with IDD.

Practical Implications

Several implications for practice follow from these findings:

The impact of employment extends well beyond the income it provides, just like in the general populations. Supporting individuals with IDD to obtain a good job may also introduce them to a host of other benefits that further enrich their lives.

Researchers should examine the quality of employment experiences alongside overall employment rates. The various job features described by participants represent possibilities for measurement in future studies (e.g., job satisfaction, inclusivity, social relationships).

Although parents and siblings have valuable insights on this issue, individuals with IDD are the most important voices to hear. Future studies should examine how their views converge or diverge from those of their family members.



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"She sees herself making progress in life. That is huge.
She has so much more confidence."

~Mother of 21-year-old daughter with an intellectual disability