



Rehabilitation Research
and Training Center

VCU-RRTC on
Employment of Persons
with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Research Study 5

Case Study:

Fidelity Illustrated

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Alex and Jordan: Similar Goals, Different Employment Experiences

Alex and Jordan are both 23 years old and recently graduated from public high schools in the same state. Like many young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), the end of school brought excitement, uncertainty, and pressure. The routines and supports that had structured much of their lives suddenly changed. Teachers, transition coordinators, and family members began asking a new set of questions:

What happens next?

Will they find meaningful work?

Will they be independent?

Who will support them?

Both Alex and Jordan want what many young adults want. They want to earn their own money rather than depend entirely on family. They want to spend less time at home and more time doing something meaningful. They want coworkers who know their names. They want reasons to wake up in the morning, routines that feel adult, and opportunities to contribute to something outside themselves. Both have talked with their parents about larger goals:

- Having enough income to help pay bills someday
- Feeling more independent
- Meeting people outside of school
- Developing confidence
- Building skills for adulthood
- Potentially living more independently in the future

Neither describes these goals using policy language like *competitive integrated employment* or *community participation outcomes*.

Instead, Alex says: “I want a job where people know me and I can help.”

Jordan says: “I just want to work like everybody else.”

Their families express similar hopes.

Alex’s mother worries about long-term independence: “I’m not expecting everything overnight. I just want to know what life looks like after school.”

Jordan’s father wonders: “Who’s going to help when we aren’t around forever?”

These concerns are familiar to many families navigating employment services for people with IDD.

Both Alex and Jordan participated in school-based transition experiences. Both completed short internships through high school programs. Teachers described them as motivated, polite, and eager to work. Neither had extensive paid employment history before graduation.

At intake for vocational rehabilitation and supported employment services, their profiles appear remarkably similar:

Characteristic	Alex	Jordan
Age	23	23
Disability	IDD	IDD
Prior work experience	School-based internship	School-based internship
Transportation	Family support	Family support
Employment goal	Animal-related work	Animal-related work
Family involvement	Parents actively involved	Parents actively involved
Motivation to work	High	High
Long-term goals	Greater independence	Greater independence

Both identify a strong interest in animals. Each enjoyed helping care for pets growing up. Both mention wanting work that feels calm, predictable, and meaningful.

If someone reviewed only their intake paperwork, they might predict similar outcomes.

- Both appear motivated.
- Both have family support.
- Both have prior experiences.
- Both want employment.
- Both enter supported employment systems with optimism.

Yet over the following years, their experiences diverge substantially.

- Not because one wanted employment more.
- Not because one had stronger family support.
- Not because one was “more capable.”

Instead, differences begin to emerge in something less visible: **the quality, consistency, and implementation of employment supports.**

The following case studies illustrate how supported employment experiences may differ when practices align more closely, or less closely, with emerging indicators of high-quality supported employment.

Case 1: Alex: High-Fidelity Supported Employment

Phase 1: Understanding the Person Before Finding the Job

Alex's first meetings with an employment specialist feel slower than expected. Alex's parents initially wonder why job applications have not started immediately. Several weeks pass before employment opportunities are discussed in any concrete way. Instead, conversations focus on questions that seem unrelated to employment:

- “What kinds of environments make you comfortable?”
- “When do you feel stressed?”
- “What routines matter to you?”
- “What kinds of people help you feel successful?”
- “What jobs have you liked or disliked before?”
- “What do you want your life to look like in five years?”

Alex sometimes struggles to answer broad questions directly. When asked about future goals, responses are simple:

- “I like animals.”
- “I like knowing what I’m supposed to do.”
- “I don’t want people yelling.”
- “I want money so I can buy things myself.”

Over multiple meetings, a more detailed picture emerges. Alex:

- Enjoys repetitive tasks and routines
- Becomes anxious when expectations change suddenly
- Performs better with visual reminders
- Likes helping and following procedures
- Has strong attention to detail when motivated
- Values calm environments more than social interaction
- Wants work that feels meaningful rather than fast-paced

The employment specialist also speaks with:

- Family members
- Former transition teachers
- Internship supervisors

School records show Alex performed well during a short internship helping maintain supplies and clean spaces but struggled when multiple supervisors provided conflicting instructions.

Rather than treating these observations as deficits, the specialist interprets them as information:

What environments help Alex succeed?

No applications are submitted during the first month.

The focus remains: **know the person before finding the job.**

Phase 2: Individualized Job Development

Because Alex repeatedly mentions animals, routines, and calm environments, the employment specialist avoids broad online applications. Instead, outreach focuses specifically on:

- Veterinary clinics
- Animal shelters
- Pet boarding facilities
- Grooming businesses

One local boarding facility agrees to an informational meeting. The owner appears hesitant. Before Alex arrives, the owner says:

“We tried supported employment before. The job coach disappeared after a few days and nobody knew what to do. The employee struggled and eventually stopped coming.”

The employment specialist does not immediately promote Alex. Instead, the conversation focuses on:

- Employer concerns
- Workplace expectations
- Typical routines
- Potential support strategies

The specialist asks: “What makes someone successful here?”

The owner responds: “Consistency. Showing up. Following routines. Caring about the animals.”

The specialist thinks: *That sounds like Alex.*

Several meetings occur before employment begins. The employer gains confidence. Alex gains familiarity. Expectations become clearer. Support plans are developed before problems emerge.

Phase 3: Placement and Workplace Supports

Alex begins working part-time, 12 hours/week. Responsibilities include:

- Cleaning kennels
- Refilling food containers
- Organizing supplies
- Laundry
- Basic animal care tasks

The first weeks are not effortless. Challenges appear quickly. When schedules change unexpectedly, Alex becomes anxious. When supervisors provide instructions differently, confusion increases. Alex hesitates asking questions because:

“I don’t want people to think I’m bad at this.”

Several minor mistakes occur. None result in crisis. Instead, supports adjust. Examples include:

- Visual schedules
- Written task sequences
- Practicing conversations with supervisors
- Gradual reduction in direct prompting
- Weekly follow-up meetings
- Employer consultation
- Repeated discussion of workplace expectations

Importantly:

- Support fading does not mean support disappears.
- Support changes.
- The employment specialist becomes less visible while remaining available.

Phase 4: Long-Term Retention and Growth

Employment continues. Six months become one year. One year becomes two. Responsibilities expand. Alex begins training new employees on kennel procedures. Coworkers begin greeting Alex by name before shifts. One coworker starts saving a preferred break seat. Small interactions emerge:

“Can you show me how you organize this? You do it better than I do.”

These moments matter, and employment becomes more than income - it becomes identity.

After 12 months, Alex works:

- Approximately 32 hours/week
- Earns \$18/hour
- Receives raises
- Uses direct deposit independently
- Contributes toward personal expenses

Challenges continue.

- A manager leaves.
- Procedures change.
- Anxiety increases temporarily.
- The employment specialist reconnects.

- Supports adjust.
- Employment continues.

After 3 years, at age 26:

- Alex remains employed.
- The outcome is not perfection.
- Stress still occurs.
- Support is still needed at times.
- But Alex reports: “I’m good at my job.”
- Family members notice changes outside work.

Alex:

- Contributes toward rent
- Talks more about future plans
- Initiates social interactions more often
- Reports greater confidence
- Discusses living more independently someday

Alex’s mother reflects: “Employment changed how Alex sees adulthood. Before, the future felt uncertain. Now there’s something to build on.”

The employer says: “I would absolutely hire someone with similar supports again. The difference was having a system around success.”

Reflection

Alex’s outcomes did not emerge from motivation, disability characteristics, nor from luck. Instead, outcomes appear shaped by multiple components commonly associated with high-quality supported employment:

- Person-centered planning
- Individualized job development
- Employer engagement
- Ongoing workplace supports
- Thoughtful support fading
- Long-term retention services
- Relationship-building
- Responsiveness over time

None of these interventions were dramatic individually. Together, they created conditions more likely to support sustained employment.

Case 2: Jordan: Low-Fidelity Supported Employment

Jordan enters supported employment with goals remarkably similar to Alex's. Jordan wants:

- A paycheck
- Greater independence
- Less time at home
- Opportunities to meet people
- A reason to leave the house each day
- Eventually, more adult responsibilities and autonomy

Jordan also likes animals. When discussing employment goals, Jordan says:

“Working with animals would be cool.”

Jordan's family hopes employment will increase confidence. Jordan's father says: “I'm not expecting a perfect job. I just want something stable where Jordan feels successful.”

At intake, Jordan appears motivated. Teachers describe Jordan similarly:

- Polite
- Reliable
- Interested in working
- Capable with support

The starting point looks much like Alex's. However, the process unfolds differently.

Phase 1: Rapid Intake and Immediate Placement Focus

Jordan's initial employment meeting lasts less than an hour. The conversation emphasizes practical questions:

- Transportation
- Availability
- Required paperwork
- Employment history

The employment specialist asks: “What kind of work are you interested in?”

Jordan responds: “Animals maybe. Or whatever.”

The answer is recorded broadly: **Employment goal: Open / Any job**

Little discussion occurs regarding:

- Sensory preferences
- Stress triggers
- Communication style
- Workplace supports
- Long-term goals
- Preferred environments
- Prior experiences

No family interviews occur. School experiences receive limited attention. The focus shifts quickly toward placement. The assumption appears to be: *Employment itself is the intervention.*

Phase 2: Generic Job Search

Applications are submitted broadly. Positions include:

- Grocery stores
- Fast-food restaurants
- Retail environments
- Stocking jobs

Several employers respond. The first available opportunity emerges at a busy fast-food restaurant. Jordan accepts. The pace feels overwhelming immediately:

- Multiple supervisors
- Changing routines
- Noise
- Unexpected customer interactions
- Frequent task-switching

Jordan says little initially. At home, however, Jordan tells family: “It’s kind of confusing.”

The response becomes: “Give it time.”

Phase 3: Initial Supports Followed by Rapid Fading

Early job coaching occurs. The employment specialist helps:

- Learn opening tasks
- Understand routines
- Navigate breaks

For several weeks, support appears adequate. Then supports decrease quickly. The expectation becomes: *Jordan should now function independently.* Employer communication becomes limited. Formal check-ins become infrequent. When schedules change unexpectedly:

- Jordan struggles.
- A supervisor interprets hesitation as disengagement.

- Jordan interprets supervisor frustration as failure.
- Small misunderstandings accumulate.
- Examples include:
 - Missed instructions
 - Confusion during task transitions
 - Anxiety about asking questions
 - Occasional tardiness after schedule changes

None of these challenges alone lead to crisis. Together, they begin shaping perceptions. The employer starts viewing Jordan as inconsistent. Jordan begins viewing work as stressful.

Phase 4: Employment Ends

Several months later, Jordan's hours decrease. Eventually, employment ends. The separation is not dramatic. No major incident occurs. Instead, the explanation feels vague: "This wasn't a great fit."

The employer reflects: "Supported employment didn't work for us."

Jordan hears something different: *I wasn't good at working.*

Jordan later says: "I guess jobs just aren't for me."

The statement worries family. Confidence changes. Future employment discussions become harder. Another referral occurs eventually. Then another. Jobs become shorter. Expectations become lower.

After 3 years, at age 26, Jordan's history includes:

- Multiple short-term positions
- Longer periods unemployed
- Reduced confidence discussing work
- Greater dependence on family
- Increased hesitation toward employment services

Jordan still wants employment, but optimism changes. The question shifts from: "What kind of work do I want?" toward: "What jobs could I actually keep?"

Family members notice changes.

Jordan's father reflects: "Every time something ended, it got harder to believe the next thing would work."

Trust in providers decreases. Expectations narrow.

Reflection

Jordan's outcomes should not automatically be interpreted as:

- Lack of motivation
- Lack of capacity
- Lack of desire

The pathway may instead reflect differences in:

- Person-centered planning
- Individualized job development
- Employer relationship-building
- Ongoing supports
- Long-term retention strategies
- Responsiveness to emerging challenges

Importantly, Jordan did receive supported employment. But receiving supported employment and receiving **high-quality supported employment** may not be equivalent experiences.

Reflection: What Was Different?

At first glance, Alex and Jordan appear remarkably similar. Both:

- Wanted employment
- Had family support
- Had prior work experiences
- Expressed interest in animals
- Desired greater independence
- Entered supported employment with optimism
- Neither lacked motivation.
- Neither lacked goals.
- Neither lacked potential.

The differences in their employment experiences may not be explained primarily by:

- Disability status
- Desire to work
- Family involvement
- Ambition

Instead, the differences may reflect something less visible: **the quality, consistency, and implementation of supports provided over time**. The following table summarizes potential differences in supported employment experiences:

Fidelity Indicator	Alex	Jordan
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Person-centered planning	Extensive exploration of preferences, strengths, and goals	Limited assessment; rapid movement toward placement
Individualized job development	Job search aligned with interests and environment preferences	Broad applications emphasizing availability
Employer engagement	Ongoing relationship-building and expectation setting	Minimal communication beyond placement
Workplace supports	Adaptive supports responsive to emerging needs	Initial support with limited adjustment over time
Support fading	Gradual reduction with continued availability	Rapid withdrawal of supports
Long-term retention services	Continued follow-up after challenges and transitions	Limited follow-up after placement
Relationship quality	Strong, collaborative relationships among provider, employer, and family	Relationships more transactional and intermittent
Response to setbacks	Challenges viewed as opportunities to adjust supports	Challenges increasingly interpreted as individual failure

Importantly: None of these factors alone guarantee success.

Likewise: Absence of a single factor does not guarantee poor outcomes.

Rather, employment trajectories may emerge through the accumulation of many small decisions over time:

- How well the person was understood.
- Whether the job matched preferences.
- Whether employers received support.
- Whether setbacks prompted adjustments rather than withdrawal.
- Whether services continued after placement.

Why This Matters

Research has consistently shown that supported employment can improve employment outcomes for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Evidence also suggests supported employment is associated with greater community participation, higher rates of competitive integrated employment, increased wages, and improved quality of life.

Stakeholders in this project similarly emphasized recurring indicators of high-quality supported employment, including:

- Individualization and person-centered planning
- Strong employer relationships

- Long-term and responsive supports
- Competent employment specialists
- Organizational capacity and consistency

Yet despite decades of evidence:

- Employment outcomes remain uneven.
- Competitive integrated employment remains inaccessible for many people with IDD.
- Employer experiences vary.
- Family expectations change.
- Job retention remains difficult.

One possible explanation is not whether supported employment exists: **it is whether supported employment is implemented with sufficient quality.**

This Is the Question Fidelity Attempts to Answer

Fidelity measurement does not ask: *Did a person receive supported employment?*

Instead, fidelity asks: *What actually happened?*

- Did providers understand the person?
- Were supports individualized?
- Did employers receive guidance?
- Were services responsive to challenges?
- Did supports continue after placement?
- Were practices delivered consistently?

These questions shift attention away from: *Why didn't this person succeed?*

toward: *What conditions surrounded this person's employment experience?*

That distinction matters. Because when outcomes are poor, explanations focused only on disability or motivation may overlook opportunities to improve systems and supports.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

For individuals with IDD and families:

- How would you know whether employment supports are high quality?
- What questions should you ask providers before accepting services?

- What would individualized support look like for you or your family member?

For employment specialists and providers:

- Which practices in Alex's story are realistic within your setting?
- Which barriers make high-fidelity implementation difficult?
- How do you currently know whether supports are effective?

For agencies and administrators:

- How is service quality measured beyond compliance requirements?
- What indicators would suggest stronger implementation?
- How are employment specialists trained and supported?

For policymakers and funders:

- How should systems define quality?
- Which outcomes matter beyond placement alone?
- How can funding structures encourage sustained, high-quality supports?

For researchers:

- Which fidelity indicators appear most strongly associated with outcomes?
- How should implementation quality be measured and validated?

Final Takeaway

Alex and Jordan's stories are fictional. However, the experiences they represent are not. Across communities, families, agencies, and employment systems, people with similar goals and similar strengths may encounter very different employment pathways. The difference may not always be **who they are**; sometimes the difference may be **the supports, relationships, expectations, and implementation surrounding them**.

Supported employment is not a single intervention delivered identically across settings. Quality varies. Relationships vary. Implementation varies. And these differences may shape outcomes. Understanding those differences is the purpose of fidelity measurement. Because improving fidelity is not only about improving services. Ultimately:

It is about increasing the likelihood that people with IDD experience meaningful work, greater independence, stronger community inclusion, and opportunities to build the futures they want.