Research Study #5 YR 3 Year 3

Research Brief #1

September 2026

What Employment Specialists Told Us About High-Quality Supported Employment for People with IDD

Why did we do this study?

Supported employment helps people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) find and keep jobs in the community. Research shows supported employment works, but the quality of services can vary widely. Some providers offer individualized, long-term supports, while others may provide limited or inconsistent support. These differences can affect whether people get jobs, keep jobs, and build meaningful careers.

We wanted to understand: ***What do employment specialists believe high-quality supported employment looks like?***

Their experiences can help us identify the practices that lead to better employment outcomes and build a fidelity scale to measure service quality.

Who participated?

We conducted focus groups with **19 Employment Specialists**



Participants included:
- Job coaches
- Program managers
- Employment specialists

Participants had:
- More than 11 years of average experience
- Experience working in community rehabilitation programs and supportedemployment agencies
- Experience supporting people with IDD across a range of settings

What did we learn?

Employment specialists consistently described supported employment as person-centered, individualized, and relationship-based. Several major themes emerged.

Theme 1: High-quality supported employment starts with understanding the person.

Participants emphasized:
- Learning about strengths
- Understanding preferences and goals
- Identifying support needs
- Exploring interests before discussing jobs

The goal is not simply employment. The goal is **the right job for the right person with the right supports.**

Theme 2: Good job matches matter.

Employment specialists stressed that poor matches can lead to:
- Job loss
- Frustration
- Reduced confidence
- Negative experiences for employers

Strong matches increase:
- Retention
- Independence
- Satisfaction

Theme 3: Relationships with employers are essential.

Participants emphasized:
- Building trust with businesses
- Understanding workplace culture
- Providing ongoing communication
- Supporting both employees and employers

Supported employment was described as involving long-term relationship building, not one-time placement.

Theme 4: Supports should change over time.

Participants discussed:
- Intensive support initially
- Gradual fading when appropriate
- Continued monitoring
- Re-engagement when challenges occur

Support does not always end after employment begins.

Theme 5: Poor supported eployment has consequences.

One participant stated: ***"The biggest detriment to successful supported employment is bad supported employment."*** *Employment Specialist*

Participants explained that poor implementation can damage:
- Job seeker confidence
- Employment outcomes
- Employer relationships
- Future opportunities for others with disabilities

Why do these findings matter!

These findings suggest that high-quality supported employment includes:
- Person-centered planning
- Individualized matching
- Employer engagement
- Long-term supports
- Flexible support fading
- Organizational quality

These practices may help improve:
- Employment stability
- Retention
- Independence
- Community participation
- Quality of life



How will these findings be used?

The findings from this study are helping us develop a **Supported Employment Fidelity Scale** to measure whether supported employment services are being implemented in ways that reflect high-quality practice.

The long-term goal is:
- **Better supported employment implementation → better employment outcomes → greater opportunity for people with IDD**
- **What this means for families:** Ask providers about individualized planning, employer relationships, and long-term supports.
- **What this means for providers:** Consider whether supports reflect these themes.

What happens next?



Future work includes:
- Additional stakeholder input
- Continued fidelity scale development
- Practical tools and training resources
- Plain language materials
- Infographics
- Case studies
- Webcasts and microlearning modules

Learn More: **For updates on this project and future resources:** https://idd.vcurrtc.org/research/rs5.cfm **OR USE**

The contents of this brief 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 brief do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. For more information contact Jennifer McDonough at JLTodd@vcu.edu

VCU

RRTC Rehabilitation Research & Training Center