

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
- Employment specialists
- Program managers

Participants had:

- More than 11 years of average experience
- Experience working in community rehabilitation programs and supported employment 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
- Satisfaction
- Independence



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 employment 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.vcurrtrc.org/research/rs5.cfm>

