Empowering People through Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling


Article Summary

As the 21st century workplace moves toward an increasing use of more flexible employee-employer situations such as temporary employment, on-call workers, and contractual positions, it behooves those who work with individuals with disabilities to help prepare consumers through increased emphasis on inclusion, empowerment, and independence. The author stresses that the relationship between vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor and consumer must be dynamic, creative, and individualized in order for the employee with disabilities to find and retain a place in the world of work.

While the article is geared toward the role(s) of the VR counselor, there are clearly implications for teachers, job coaches, and others who participate in the process of vocational training and placement for individuals with disabilities. This is especially important given the following challenges that consumers often face:

- Limitations in early life experiences;
- Decision-making regarding work; and,
- Negative self-concept.

A paternalistic process imposed by educators and counselors may have the unintended effect of making individuals with disabilities overly dependent on others and unable to participate in a changing workplace.

An alternative framework for the relationship between VR counselors and consumers is presented. Key aspects of this relationship are:

- Counselor-consumer working alliance is marked by a partnership working for mutually agreed upon vocational goals and outcomes based on strengths, abilities, and interests of the individual, not just the disability.
- Informed choice is accomplished when consumers have the tools to learn to make choices as well as the information to do so.
- Self-determination comes about when an individual is an active participant in developing and working toward his/her own ambitions.
- Empowerment is a process that leads to control over one's life and immediate environment.

According to the author, an increased emphasis on consumer empowerment in the counseling process will require:

- Counselor training techniques that emphasize the goals of inclusion, empowerment, and independence;
- Counselor knowledge of state-federal mandates and best practices regarding informed-choice; and,
- Consumer self-determination as a primary goal.