
MWA UPDATE

Working with Persons with Disabilities In a Job Placement/Job Retention Environment

By Richard Pimentel

Providing services to individuals and groups who have specialized needs and unique employment barriers is one of the greatest challenges for today's employment and training community. Before the advent of the "One-Stop Shop" concept of service delivery, job placement professionals often specialized in working with specific groups such as ex-offenders, persons with disabilities, youth and refugees. The current system now places emphasis on each placement professional's ability to work with **all** groups. This recognizes the reality that any one applicant may have more than one employment barrier and may also be a member of more than one group. It opens the doors for many opportunities that were in the past difficult to access when program funding was tied to a specific employment barrier as well as a specific field.

In the early JTPA days, I was working with a client who was deaf. He wanted to be placed in a general job-training program for building maintenance workers. I was told that I could not get him in because they had no staff who felt comfortable working with a person who was deaf and that the deaf had their own training program in electronic assembly anyway. Why didn't he just go there? Without question, **today's** philosophy of inclusion is a better one for our clients, especially for those with disabilities. But this progress is not without its difficulties and challenges.

The issue suggests many questions. Can placement professionals hope to learn the ins and outs of job development for persons with disabilities without negatively impacting on their ability to manage the rest of their caseload? What is there to learn? Do they need to learn anything at all? Isn't all placement the same?

The following is a response to these questions and some ideas about what the placement professional needs to know about working with persons with disabilities.

How is job placement for persons with disabilities different than for other groups? The best way to illustrate how job placement for persons with disabilities is different than for the general population is to point out that during the last eight years of unprecedented prosperity and economic growth in the United States, nearly every minority group has made measurable employment strides except for persons with disabilities. The unemployment rate for persons with disabilities is today about what it was ten years ago. This is before the passage of the ADA! It still takes a person with a disability significantly more employer contacts to get an interview and more interviews to get a job offer than their equally qualified non-disabled counterpart. While job placement for persons with disabilities may not be radically "different" in theory, it is without question more labor intensive and requires the placement professional to be familiar with the fears and concerns of the employers about this population. It also requires the placement professional to be able to prepare the client to deal with these fears and concerns.

Why is job placement for persons with disabilities not keeping pace? In answering that question, it might be useful to consider that many minority groups were traditionally not employed because they were simply not considered. The hot economy and the labor shortage has

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caused employers to consider groups (the new labor pool) that they have not taken into account before. The simple act of considering these groups has increased opportunities and employment for individuals with disabilities.

Does this mean that persons with disabilities are not being considered at all? No, they are being considered. The problem is many employers do not know **how** to consider them. They are not sure how to interview, evaluate, train and, when appropriate, accommodate them. And to add to this dilemma, many placement professionals do not know how to interview, evaluate, refer and advise clients with disabilities.

Should only rehabilitation counselors work with persons with disabilities?

No. The field of rehabilitation counseling is not by its nature a placement oriented field. Historically, it has been involved in testing and determining what type of training or field a person should pursue. Recently, public rehabilitation has focused only on the most severe disabilities which represent just a small percentage of the persons with disabilities looking for jobs and an even smaller percentage of the clients who come into your offices.

Can a placement professional learn how to work with persons with disabilities?

Absolutely! But it requires specific training, guidance and technical assistance. A training for placement professionals in your area on how to work with persons with disabilities should consist of:

1. General attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

Just as Human Resource interviewers need to evaluate their attitudes and beliefs about persons with disabilities, so does the placement professional. A training covering attitudes, myths and beliefs about persons with disabilities, along with language and etiquette, is a vital first step in any placement professional's training. It would be a shame if a placement professional did not refer a person with a disability to a job that he or she would have been considered for, simply because the placement professional could not picture the person doing it.

2. Communication.

Many disabilities present communication challenges. How will someone fill out the paperwork? What about the person with difficult speech? How do you communicate with someone who is hard of hearing? Training in communication with persons with disabilities is vital for the placement professional. It will also teach the placement professional how to recognize when there may be a problem for a client in a job interview and how to advise both the client and the employer.

3. Working with employers.

Placement of persons with disabilities is not the old school "refer and duck." Persons with disabilities do best in job interviews when the placement professional has established a rapport with the employer and has prepared the employer to interview the client. Persons with disabilities often do best in "hidden job market" or informational interviews, which are more time consuming and labor intensive than referrals to open job orders.

Understanding employers' fears and concerns about persons with disabilities in employment is vital for any placement professional. Intensive interview preparation and follow-up is the key to job placement success for persons with disabilities.

4. **The law.**

While no placement professional should ever try to use the law to leverage persons with disabilities to be offered jobs, it is essential that every placement professional understand the basics of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Especially the area of reasonable accommodation in the interview process and the job. They need to know what an employer may or may not ask. As well as how to increase the client's chances of being offered the job by disclosing the disability in a positive way during the interview.

Also it is important for each placement professional to understand what he or she may or may not disclose in the referral and throughout the entire employer service process.

5. **Problem solving and reasonable accommodation.**

Here we are not talking about the law but rather how to determine if a client can do the job and whether or not the client would need a reasonable accommodation or job modification to do it.

Teaching the placement professional to help the client think through this process and present a simple plan to an employer is often the difference between a job offer and a turndown. Learning how to effectively problem solve is vital to the success of working with people with disabilities and employers.

6. **Retention.** Many people believe that retention has not been a common problem for persons with disabilities; they tend to stay in a job once they are placed. However, as for everyone, the first 90 days of employment are crucial and it is important to work with both the employer and the client to deal with issues that may come up when a new employee has a disability. Everything from co-workers' attitudes, communication, accommodation and socialization can be areas where an informed and trained placement professional can make all the difference.

What is the implication for placement and training programs?

Persons with disabilities are enjoying the new service philosophy of inclusion. However, inclusion for persons with disabilities does not mean simply treating them the same as everyone else. For many persons with disabilities, "same treatment" does not mean "same result."

Just as insecurity and a lack of confidence on the part of employers about their ability to work with a person with a disability may mean that a person is not hired, a placement professional's insecurity and lack of confidence in working with clients with disabilities may mean that the client is not served adequately.

Many groups we work with have been disenfranchised in employment because they were not treated the same as others. When a group is the same and is treated differently, unfairness can be the only result. But what about a group that is different?

In the case when a disability makes a person different, **different treatment** can often be the **only** path to equal results. As an example, we do not provide sign language interpreters for everyone, just for those who require it. No one is getting special services when we do provide this service for those who need it, because this different treatment is the only way to ensure the same results.

What is the future of employment for persons with disabilities?

In the last ten years we have seen remarkable progress in the areas that will affect the employment of persons with disabilities.

- ✓ Education has made great strides in mainstreaming and inclusion to ensure that young people with disabilities are getting a first-rate education.
- ✓ Technology and rehabilitation medicine have helped develop accommodations and aids that have allowed persons with disabilities to work up to their potential.
- ✓ Socially, we have evolved in our stereotypes and views of persons with disabilities.
- ✓ Specialized job placement for persons with disabilities has made great strides in placement and retention.

Your organization has the ability to take advantage of all these factors to assist this capable, motivated yet unfortunately still underemployed and underserved segment of our population. Millions of persons with disabilities have not enjoyed the opportunities of our recent economic growth and fear that in an economic downturn they will fall even further behind. For them, "inclusion" is not just a service delivery philosophy, it is their best hope for independence and personal pride.

With the right training, supervision, and support, each and every one of your staff who is successful in placement can and will be successful in placing persons with disabilities.

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About the Author

Richard Pimentel is nationally renowned as a consultant, keynote speaker, professional trainer and author on job retention, attitude change in the workplace, return to work, workers' compensation, and cost containment. His vast and penetrating knowledge about issues related to disability and people of difference is communicated with humor and conviction.

Richard Pimentel is an acknowledged authority on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). His training has not only successfully enabled managers and supervisors to participate in cost reduction initiatives and implementation of policies and procedures to reduce work site accidents and re-injuries, but has also helped employers dispel stereotypes and embrace diversity.

Nationally acclaimed publications authored by Richard Pimentel include: **Windmills Attitudes and Disability training Curriculum, Developing the New Employee: Retaining and Enhancing a Diverse Workforce, The Taking Control Process: Beyond Light Duty, The Job Placement – ADA Connection, The Workers' Compensation ADA Connection, and The Return to Work Process: A Case Management Approach.** He has also produced award winning training videos **Return to Work for Employees and Supervisors, and Taking Control: The Workers' Compensation Return to Work Connection.**