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Empowering Workers with Disabilities

A Philadelphia Story

John Colborn
Stephanie Koch
Laura Welder

THE ISSUE

Work is a fundamental, yet transformative element of life. In addition to wages earned, work presents employees with purpose, integrates them within a community, stimulates motivation, reinforces and builds on education, and empowers them with ongoing offerings of opportunity. The basic elements of successful employment do not change based on one's ability. As the U.S. Department of Labor's Campaign for Disability Employment touts, "At work, it's what people CAN do that matters."¹

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2017), 20.6 percent of individuals over age 16 with a disability were participating in the labor force² as of May 2017, compared to the 68.6 percent of those in the same age group without a disability. In 2016, 10.5 percent of individuals with disabilities were unemployed, significantly more than the 4.6 percent without a disability (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018). What leads to this great disparity?

The hiring process generally follows a well-trodden path. Employers tend to seek individuals with loosely related credentials and previous experience, relying on typical assessment techniques rooted in résumé/application reviews and interviews, despite ample anecdotal evidence of the limitations of these approaches. When diving into the vast labor pool before them, employers neglect less conventional modes

of hiring individuals with disabilities and instead tap more traditional populations.

However, a confluence of factors has led at least some employers to take a second look at their employment practices. Tighter labor markets across regions and industries have forced many employers to look beyond their usual labor-sourcing techniques. HR professionals are also beginning to question the traditional hiring process and are looking for ways to improve upon the generic college credential and work history assessment. Finally, as social expectations of workplace diversity and inclusion change, employers have begun to look at less traditional hiring techniques to enhance team effectiveness, better position the organization in labor markets, and improve workplace attractiveness more generally.

Indeed, a plethora of supported employment services are provided by organizations that assist employees with on-the-job training, workplace modifications, and job development and placement strategies that lead to long-term employee retention and business success. The key to this success is to incorporate workforce development practices across all supports that individuals with disabilities may receive. Similar to the practices utilized by recruiters and job placement firms for individuals without disabilities, community-integrated employment, which provides opportunities for all individuals to fully participate within the community, works to discover an individual's strengths, weaknesses, and skills, and matches them to a job that fits both their interests and experience. Consider a student with an intellectual disability who worked in a laundry after school for four years; could a next rung on a career pathway ladder be in a retail clothing store, managing inventory, and designing displays? Consider a hearing-impaired individual who loves to work with his hands; would a natural fit be an advanced manufacturing plant where the environment's noise would be too loud for someone without a hearing impairment?

With supports such as job matching, job coaching, and technological innovation, employment service organizations are able to dispel widespread misperceptions that individuals with disabilities are not capable of learning new skills and completing tasks. Hiring individuals with disabilities has a positive and significant impact on businesses and work places. In an analysis of workers with disabilities compared to workers without disability, Walgreens determined that workers with

disabilities had higher productivity, lower turnover, and a better safety record than their fellow workers without disabilities (Kaletta, Binks, and Robinson 2012). An inclusive, diverse workplace creates a positive culture for both employers and customers alike. Individuals with disabilities are currently the largest minority in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor 2018), and studies show that the more a company's staff reflects its demographics, the better its bottom line (U.S. Chamber of Commerce 2013). A workplace that represents the diversity of its targeted clients or customers will be better positioned to understand, appeal to, and serve similar populations.

Kristy Chambers, CEO of Columbus Community Center, a non-profit organization serving adults and teens with disabilities, remarked that individuals with disabilities often fit seamlessly into a company. "When you find that right fit, they become a part of the work culture and they truly can be an inspiration to their coworkers, customers and stakeholders," she says. "Anyone who has worked with someone with a disability in their work environment can agree that they're quite inspirational because they've overcome obstacles. It's a reminder to everyone that good work ethic and enthusiasm is really what makes a good employee" (Francom 2016). Combining tailored supports aimed to help individuals with disabilities obtain and retain jobs, increase their independence, and live self-sustaining lifestyles, has demonstrated benefits that affect employers, the local economy, and individuals with disabilities themselves.

A PHILADELPHIA MODEL FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

To address the unmet needs of Philadelphia youth with disabilities, a group of parents approached JEVS Human Services in 2011 to partner in the creation of a co-ed community of young adults with disabilities. Since JEVS's founding in 1941, the agency has grown from a single focus—helping Jewish refugees find work after arriving to the United States—to a multifaceted twenty-first century nonprofit that serves more than 30,000 people annually through 29 programs. JEVS's mission—to enhance the employability, independence, and quality of

life of individuals through a broad range of programs and create innovative and sustainable solutions to address current and future community needs—promotes an asset-based approach to working with clients to help them achieve the most self-sufficient lifestyle possible. Drawn to JEVS's mission and commitment to help individuals from all backgrounds achieve independence through education, job readiness, and supportive services, these parents looked to JEVS as a natural partner in this endeavor. Together, they established the Philadelphia Independence Network (PIN), located 30 minutes west of Philadelphia in the borough of Narberth.

The first collaborative program of its kind in the Philadelphia area, PIN tailors supportive services to the needs and capabilities of each program member, building their independence, self-esteem, and skills and helping them connect to employment and other community-based activities while creating a network of friends. PIN achieves this through a partnership between JEVS staff, the youths' parents, and the members themselves. The overarching goal of the PIN program is to enhance participants' autonomy and independence across multiple domains. To achieve this goal, PIN staff along with a Steering Committee of parents aim to create and sustain a community of young adults with disabilities, providing opportunities for independence, socialization, and group enrichment, as well as individual residential habilitation and vocational placement and coaching services that meet each member's unique needs and skills.

PIN members are young adults who demonstrate potential to live independently with support. Rather than seeking individuals with a particular type of disability, PIN staff select members to join based on their interest in work and volunteer opportunities, as well as a desire to participate in social and educational programs. In other words, membership in PIN is not defined by a particular disability status, but rather by an ability and desire to become integrated, productive members of the community in which they live. Members live in their own apartments in a suburb of Philadelphia within walking distance to public transportation, so that they can access jobs, supermarkets, shopping, as well as cultural and sports venues. JEVS understands that PIN members often come to the program having had negative experiences within their wider communities due to misperceptions regarding their disability. PIN therefore strives to support all members in developing strong, posi-

tive relationships both within and outside the program and in preparing for, obtaining, and successfully maintaining employment.

The PIN model uniquely embraces a whole-life perspective such that employment services are fully embedded within the larger program and are delivered by cross-trained staff utilizing a team approach. The mentor associates/job coaches also assist members with daily life skills, allowing staff to more efficiently and successfully match members to jobs while also remaining responsive to employers and their needs. The program also features a dedicated career navigator. Although the career navigator's focus is employment related, as an integrated team member, she also works with members and mentor associates/job coaches across multiple activities and settings. This in-depth involvement allows the career navigator to identify areas in which a member excels as well as their individual learning styles and interests. In short, spending time with members in a variety of situations strongly informs individualized career development activities.

Many members come to PIN having successfully completed post-secondary education programs; identifying, preparing, and receiving support for internship and employment opportunities is the natural next step as they work toward independent living and self-sufficiency. PIN staff collaborate with members to find the right job, internship opportunity, or next step along their career path. Given employers' desire for accurate job matching (i.e., job seekers interests and strengths paired with job roles, skills expectations, and needs), PIN staff utilize a customized and person-centered approach to support members in exploring their interests and gaining clarity about their skills through specifically matched internships. As of the summer of 2017, PIN had 24 young adult members, 18 of whom were employed—a high success rate by any standard. While the employment rate of PIN members is certainly noteworthy, the program's retention outcomes demonstrate its real impact. Sixty-seven percent of members have maintained their employment well beyond the standard 90 days tracked by offices of vocational rehabilitation.³

The PIN model provides the following employment services:

- **Discovery process**, a qualitative and person-centered assessment that gathers information about an individual through conversations and observations during community-based experiences;

- **Job search planning**, a process that stems from the data gathered and assumptions made from the discovery process that helps identify industry matches and prepares the individuals for résumé development and further education about employment options;
- **Job development and negotiation**, a combination of efforts from PIN staff who develop employer relationships and support the PIN member during the interviewing process, including ensuring salaries offered are not subminimum and work schedules are compatible with the member's lifestyle; and
- **Post-employment support**, which includes job coaching, both on and off the job, to ensure the job match is a fit and that the individual is comfortable on the work site and is meeting employer expectations. Post-employment support also ensures that the job role is as described and that the individual has the opportunity to grow within the role.

This model applies the idea that, as for any young adult, meaningful career paths are not always linear and usually involve multiple jobs and job environments. Although it is highly unusual for both staff and an organization to dedicate time and resources for cross-training and providing services informed by a whole-life approach, PIN members such as John, whose story is told in the next section, have benefited from this holistic strategy.

JOHN'S STORY

At 22 years of age, John (*name changed for privacy*) is one of PIN's youngest members. He has an autism spectrum disorder and came to PIN after struggling to find a path following graduation from high school. Prior to joining PIN, John had tried attending two independent-living college experience programs. Both programs were located out of state and contributed to the strong social anxiety he was experiencing, so John decided he needed to be closer to his family in Philadelphia.

In May 2015, John moved into his own apartment and joined PIN. Since joining the program, he has demonstrated tremendous growth in

his level of independence. Throughout his first year, John held a part-time job as part of a maintenance team at a private school. Although employed, he was very unhappy in this position and often talked of his dream to work for a major metropolitan transportation system.

John is well versed regarding public transportation systems in Philadelphia and other major urban areas. He is particularly interested in trains and is extremely knowledgeable about the broader operation of public transit systems as well as the mechanics of various types of trains. Since he was a teenager, John has attended the monthly public board meetings of Philadelphia's public transportation company. He is well known for his public comments and interest in improving the operations of public transportation systems. In June 2016, Philadelphia's public transportation provider offered John a job as an undercover rider to assess customer satisfaction regarding both the bus and subway systems.

John is thrilled to be able to work for a major public transit system and share his vast knowledge and passion, but this is not a simple job. He has worked very hard with PIN staff to learn how to channel his passion in a formal context, to learn new tasks quickly, and to demonstrate the soft skills critical for successful professional employment. Importantly, through his work with the PIN team, John has learned how to interpret the subtleties inherent in evaluating customer satisfaction. Since the beginning of 2017, John has been able to do his job almost completely independently. With the assistance of the PIN team, he also has learned how to complete the detailed reports required by his job.

Three months after John started his job, the transportation provider had to let its part-time undercover riders go, and John was the only employee that the provider decided to keep. Staff members clearly appreciate the expertise and knowledge that he brings to his work. Because his position remains part time, the PIN team is helping John find additional ways to contribute his public transportation skills, knowledge, and passion.

One option for John may be to become a peer mentor, teaching other young adults with disabilities how to use public transportation. The occupational therapy department of a large Philadelphia-based university recently approached PIN regarding research they are conducting on the utility of peer mentoring in travel training for individuals with disabilities. PIN connected John with the researchers, and he is helping

them identify best practices related to travel training, as well as providing input that informs their research direction and grant-seeking efforts.

John's story exemplifies many of the core values of the PIN model. The program is committed to helping members identify their areas of interest and strength, and achieve their highest level of self-sufficiency and independence. Through their job development efforts, the PIN team helps members translate interests and abilities into viable job opportunities. Once members have obtained employment, PIN staff provide ongoing job coaching to ensure a successful experience for both members and employers.

Notably, success on one particular job does not necessarily mean that job will be a member's only or last job. The PIN model is fluid, recognizing that finding the right job is often an iterative process. As with any young adult, members may "try on" several different jobs, learning as they go what will be an ideal match. As John's story demonstrates, the model is grounded not only in developing the skills necessary to succeed in employment, but also in the belief that members have unique perspectives and experiences valuable to the wider community. PIN members are expected to engage with their community through employment, volunteering, and participating in community activities based on their individual interests. Community integration and vocational development, both hallmarks of the PIN program, are overwhelmingly a "win-win" for members, employers, and the community as a whole.

THE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE⁴

Jerry and Lois are parents who have been involved in the development of the PIN program since the very beginning, and their son David was one of the first PIN members. When they describe their experience with PIN, they frame their perspectives around programmatic "elements of success." Jerry and Lois praise PIN as having successfully "created a culture of work" driven by the members themselves. By defining membership criteria in terms of desire and drive to work, rather than by clinical disability diagnosis, PIN attracts members who are strongly committed to working. Both members and staff are excited

about employment, because employment, education, and/or seeking employment is a requirement of the program. Members also hold each other accountable for actively engaging in employment activities. Jerry and Lois note that PIN staff does an excellent job collaborating with members to think beyond traditional employment opportunities and finding jobs that specifically meet individual needs, interests, and skills.

Jerry and Lois also believe that PIN's embedded vocational supports model is critical to the program's impact. Specifically, they identify staff cross-training as a major element of success within the model because there is a consistent level of content knowledge and expertise across all staff. They note that members can approach any available staff member at any given point with a work or life issue. Members can also seek out assistance from whichever staff person they feel most comfortable with, knowing that all staff members are equally capable of providing guidance.

In addition, Jerry and Lois have observed that the cross-trained PIN staff are well positioned to help members achieve a successful work-life balance. Recognizing that vocational and social issues tend to influence each other, PIN staff take a whole-life perspective and provide guidance across all life domains. As opposed to more traditional job coaching models where the coach is on-site with the participant for a short duration of time, the embedded PIN model allows staff to spend greater amounts of time with members, both on and off the job. This enables staff to identify and address more subtle challenges members face. Lois and Jerry also believe the continuity of PIN staff is a major program asset—PIN members do not have to start over multiple times with different staff persons throughout the employment-seeking and support process.

Jerry and Lois support the unique public-private partnership between JEVS and families of PIN members, who are integral contributors to the ongoing success of the program. In addition to families serving on the PIN Steering Committee, the program relies on the interconnected network of families as a resource for potential member jobs. This partnership increases members' independence and forces parents to confront their own issues related to their children's growing independence. In other words, member employment has served as a catalyst for parents to reexamine their perceptions of, and the ways they react to, their children. Parents must grow to recognize that their child is

no longer entirely financially dependent. Jerry and Lois describe this transition around the control of finances and general independence as a learning process with which both parents and the program members must grapple. To help both PIN members and their parents address this challenge, the PIN program has integrated a comprehensive financial literacy component to its model. This training assists members in building a solid financial base for themselves and ultimately achieving financial independence.

Jerry and Lois contrasted the PIN model with the traditional model at the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). Once participants seeking services solely through OVR secure a position, they are prohibited from receiving additional assistance to find future jobs. This limited support deters opportunities for economic mobility and financial self-sufficiency. In contrast, the PIN model recognizes that a member's first job will not necessarily be a final job. In support of the program's end goal, the PIN team works with members so that they require less staff guidance over time and assume an increasingly independent role in all facets of their lives.

THE EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVE⁵

Robert (*not his real name*) is one of the 18 PIN members with a steady job. He works several days a week for Wells Fargo in the company's lock box operation. During a conversation involving Wells Fargo's decision to hire Robert, the bank emphatically expressed that employing individuals with disabilities benefits businesses' bottom line. Wells Fargo staff relayed that "programs such as [PIN] and organizations such as JEVS, help us make sure we [are] looking at increasing our talent and recruiting bases." Wells Fargo staff also described that hiring individuals with disabilities benefits the workplace more generally. A staff member specifically said, "We like to think that bringing Robert on board has had nothing but a positive effect on both our Team and the work environment. . . . Robert has such a strong work ethic and drive that we're hoping a lot of that rubs off on some of his current and future Team Members."

Echoing this belief, other employers spoke about the specific and unique skills people with disabilities bring to the workplace. The CEO of another organization that employs a PIN member remarked that employers usually underestimate what people with disabilities can contribute. She remarked that once employers recognize the talent people with disabilities bring to their jobs and how their contributions often fill an unmet need, “something special happens.” Employers that hire people with disabilities “get committed employees that increase businesses’ success and growth.”

Another employer believes that hiring individuals with disabilities helps dispel stereotypes that those with disabilities are unable to work in an integrated workforce setting. This employer shared that it is precisely an individual’s experience with a disability that makes her or him better able to connect and empathize not only with other employees but also with customers.

Finally, the employers of PIN members shared that actually engaging in the process of hiring people with disabilities helped dispel misconceptions that the process is intimidating and not worth the effort. One employer related an important lesson: spending time up front to get to know the individual as well as accommodations he or she might need is actually what every employer should be doing with *all* of their employees, not only those with an identified disability. Employers also learned that while it is important to respect individuals’ needs, it is equally important not to treat them differently than other employees; this means holding workers with disabilities to the same standards and codes of conduct.

CONCLUSION

Models like PIN remain challenging to sustain. Public support systems may create a false perspective of the true advantages of work for individuals with disabilities. Issues that undermine the efforts of individuals with disabilities who want to work include: benefits reductions that occur after wage gains, a neglect of supports for transportation to and from employment (Maynard 2011; Vallas, Fremsted, and Ekman 2015), and job coaching offered only during working hours.

PIN's holistic model integrates both the social and vocational aspects of members' lives, supporting their growth toward living independently and building a career. It makes economic sense to support members in all areas of their lives, including finding and maintaining a well-suited job and creating meaningful, satisfying lives *within their community*. These supports cost society less money than the expense associated with supporting individuals who are unemployed and/or unnecessarily living in a costly group home (Nord and Hamre 2014).

Overall, the PIN model flips the traditional disability employment paradigm. PIN offers a whole-life, integrated approach that guides members to achieve independent lives, founded upon employment and participation within their community. The model benefits not only PIN members and their families but also employers and the overall community, proving that empowering individuals with disabilities is a worthwhile investment. With its successful implementation and sustainability over time, PIN in Narberth has gained a solid reputation for providing stable futures for young adults with disabilities and the ability to provide their parents the opportunity to enable their children's independence. This reputation has spread throughout the region and now expanded to New Jersey, where a second Steering Committee of interested parents has partnered with JEVS to develop a location in Collingswood, roughly 15 minutes from Center City Philadelphia. Both Collingswood and Narberth provide a welcoming and walkable town filled with employment, education, and social opportunities for members. The expansion has lead JEVS to brand the two sites as the JEVS Independence Network.

Notes

1. See the campaign's website: <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/CampaignForDisabilityEmployment.htm> (accessed September 7, 2018).
2. Labor force participation is defined as being employed or actively seeking work. It does not include individuals who are discouraged and stopped searching for jobs. The national unemployment rate is measured by the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the labor force. See the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website: https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm (accessed September 7, 2018).
3. Once an individual begins employment, the job coach must work to ensure that the individual can retain the employment over time. An employment outcome is

achieved only if the individual has maintained the employment outcome for a minimum of 90 days (the standard job retention period). The job coach must follow the individual during this, often critical, initial period on the job. At the end of this period, the individual, the job coach, and the employer must consider the employment outcome to be satisfactory and agree that the individual is performing well on the job.

4. Information gathered from interviews between the authors and PIN parents that occurred on May 30, 2017.
5. Information gathered from interviews between the authors and employers that occurred on July 19, 2017.

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