

THE CENTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH: A SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE

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Anne Smith, Career Specialist for The Center for Mental Health, an employment support program that provided job training and placement services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities faced the difficult challenge of assisting job-seeking clients to find meaningful employment. Although employers were sometimes willing to meet her clients, they were often unwilling to hire them after realizing the extent of their disabilities. Placing clients has become an immediate priority because of a federal law passed in July 2014 that put a deadline on placing all participating clients in jobs in the community. In order to meet this challenge, Anne and her team will need to redouble their efforts to market their clients to the local business community.

ANNE'S CHALLENGE

Anne Smith, a Career Specialist at The Center for Mental Health (hereafter referred to as CMH), was very hopeful about a job prospect for one of her clients.¹ The interview at the fast food restaurant went well, and the hiring manager promised to get back to Anne within a few days. After several weeks went by, the hiring manager told Anne that someone else was hired for the job. Anne was disappointed, but not surprised. Although companies were sometimes willing to meet her clients, they were often unwilling to hire them after realizing the extent of their disabilities. "That was a frustrating situation," Anne recalled. "We made sure that our client was thoroughly prepared and trained to work. That company didn't give us a chance."

Anne's clients had a wide range of abilities, and as a result were sometimes difficult to place. Some were diagnosed with intellectual or developmental delays, autism spectrum disorders, Down's Syndrome or cerebral palsy. Some

¹ "Anne Smith" and "The Center for Mental Health" are pseudonyms.

clients also had psychiatric conditions (i.e. schizophrenia, personality and depressive disorders). Successful placement required extensive training and preparation by Anne and members of her team, and willing employers who would give her clients a chance to demonstrate their strengths.

Anne wanted employers to look beyond her clients' disabilities to see their full potential. Many of her clients thrived and became valued employees when placed in the right environment. Anne admitted however, that some of the employers' concerns were sometimes warranted, "One of my clients had to be removed for punching a female employee in the face, and another was let go because of the excessive cell phone calls from his parents." "Not everyone can be successfully placed on the job." Anne said, "Sometimes it is like putting a square peg in a round hole."

Anne found that employers often made hiring decisions based on several contingencies including familiarity with intellectual and developmental delays, ability to quickly replace employees if they were unable to do the job, and willingness to manage the employees' challenges. Sometimes these unknowns did not work out in favor of her clients, and they remained unemployed despite extensive training and preparation. To make matters worse, a federal law passed in July 2014 put Anne under increased pressure to place her most challenging clients.

Anne spent a lot of time with her clients in order to discover their passions and to determine the skills and knowledge they needed to be ready for their desired job. Once the clients entered the workforce (depending on their capabilities), they were slowly and carefully phased in to an employment situation, often regularly accompanied by Anne, or by someone else in her department, until the client was ready to work on his/her own. Those employees with more severe disabilities who were not able to maintain traditional employment, were sometimes placed in an in-house work program that would allow them to perform work for companies while being housed at a CMH site, under the constant guidance and supervision of agency employees. The recently passed law established a June 30, 2015 deadline for phasing out this in-house work program, also known as a "sheltered workplace," which was the only viable alternative for some of Anne's more challenging clients. After the law passed, her already difficult job became a lot harder.

Anne and her team had tried several approaches to place their clients. One of their preferred techniques was to teach the job seekers how to market themselves. Before they even began their job search, Anne, or a member of her team worked extensively with each client to help them identify their unique strengths and

interests. Job seekers received a placement assessment to match them with other clients who had similar abilities. Career Specialists then worked individually with each job skills group on topics including interview practices, resume development and work-appropriate behavior. In addition to this multi-step approach to training, Anne and her team regularly reached out to local businesses to talk about the agency and employment opportunities. They also accompanied their job-seeking clients to local job fairs, and marketed The CMH's employment program through education and community outreach.

COMPANY HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

CMH was a community-based organization that offered a broad spectrum of services for individuals with disabilities and life challenges. They helped clients with career planning, goals, and therapy that could help them adapt work skills based on individual needs. The organization was founded in 1958, in the Boston metropolitan area. Its original charge was to be a child guidance center that would help children and families struggling with emotional difficulties. In 2005, CMH began offering programs in 20 communities, serving close to 5,000 individuals and their families each year. The organization became a recognized provider of comprehensive human services in their region, including counseling, clinical care, employment training, and residential services. CMH hired a diverse staff of employees and volunteers who were trained to respond innovatively to emerging needs of individuals living with disabilities and other challenges.

A NEW LAW AND A NEW CHALLENGE

CMH clients with significant disabilities were often assigned to the 'sheltered workplaces' referred to earlier. However, the July 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, (WIOA), along with a new Medicaid rule that restricted federal payments to employers who housed employees in sheltered workshops, put significant pressure on agencies like CMH to transfer employees out of the sheltered spaces into fully integrated positions. WIOA was an amendment of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which supported the nation's primary programs and investments in employment services, workforce development, adult education and vocational rehabilitation activities. (Yashchin, 2014) The original 1998 act and its recent amendment were put in place to ameliorate a growing job crisis in the U.S. Unemployment, underemployment, unstable or temporary employment and limited advancement for minimum-skilled workers were all primary symptoms of this job crisis. One important aspect of this trend was the fact that individuals with disabilities had the highest rate of unemployment of any group, and more than two thirds did not participate in the workforce at all. (<http://www.murray.senate.gov/public/?p=workforce-innovation-and-opportunity-act>.)

In order to help agencies like CMH comply with the law, the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services developed the “Blueprint for Success.”(Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services)

EXHIBIT 1

Key milestones of “Blueprint for Success”

- Restrict new referrals to sheltered workspaces after January 1, 2014.
- Close sheltered workshops by June 30, 2015.
- Transition participants in sheltered workshop programs during fiscal year 2015 to one of the following options: Integrated individual or group employment at minimum wage or higher and/or community based day services.
- Continue to transition individuals from Community Based Day Services to Integrated work opportunities that pay minimum wage or higher based on person-centered career plan.
- Gradually phase out group employment settings that pay less than minimum wage.

The urgency to comply with WIOA and the state-imposed milestone intensified due to a recent federal lawsuit against the State of Rhode Island. In June, 2013, the Department of Justice sued the State of Rhode Island and City of Providence for use of segregated sheltered workshops, which were in violation of Title II of the ADA, 42 U.S.C. § 12132 (2006). The lawsuit stipulated that the defendants discriminated against individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities by segregating them unnecessarily. The lawsuit settlement required the defendants to ensure that services, programs, and activities provided by public entities be delivered in the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of persons with disabilities. (EDBlogs)

AN IDEAL WORLD

Anne agreed in principle with the idea of integrating all of her clients and with providing them a fair wage, however, she believed that there were many clients who simply would not be able to thrive in traditional work situations. “Many have trouble with basic life skills,” Anne said. “Showing up on time and maintaining good personal hygiene is a major challenge for some of our people.” In an ideal world, all of her clients would be embraced and integrated into mainstream society, and they would be respected as the hard-working and

loyal employees she believed them to be. Anne wanted that ideal world to materialize, but she knew that in the meantime, she needed a plan that would help CMH meet the deadline imposed by the new law.

REFERENCES

Yashchin, A. (2014). Understanding the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. Huffington Post, July 2014

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