

## Improving Employment Outcomes While Reducing Costs

By Robert Cimera

When I worked as a job coach, I received the dreaded “talk” from the agency director around the same time each year. The discussion would always start the same way – he’d walk in, sit down at the end of the conference table, and say to me, “Bob, I really appreciate all your hard work...” And then the fearful “but” would come in, “but we also need you to increase your production.”

“After all,” my director would continue, “the costs of utilities have increased, our health care costs went up, and you received a 1.5% raise this year. As a result, we need you to generate more income so we can provide the same high-quality services to individuals with disabilities that we’ve always provided.” Of course, this meant that we had to increase the amount of billable hours that we generated.

When I started working as a job coach, I had to be in “billable status” about 70% of the time. Each year, the expectations crept upward — 73%, 75%, to 77%. Meanwhile, Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and our other funding sources kept cutting back the services we were able to bill for.

During one, “I-really-appreciate-all-the-hard-work-you-do-but-talk,” I did a few calculations and found that, if the current trend continued, my fellow job coaches and I would have to be in 101% billable time within seven years! I raised my hand and informed my director of this conclusion. Shortly thereafter he suggested that I look elsewhere for employment.

### Moving On

I enrolled in a doctoral program at the

University of Illinois, where I soon found myself interested in the cost-effectiveness of supported employment programs. My initial studies investigated whether supported employment was a good investment for taxpayers. Most of my research found that it was.

I began noticing that some supported employment programs were *very* efficient. Their supported employees not only obtained positions within the community, but they also *retained* their positions longer than what was typical. Furthermore, some of these programs were able to get people with disabilities working with relatively few services. Gradually, my research focus began to explore how agencies could reduce the *costs* of services that supported employees receive while improving *employment outcomes* attained at the same time. One of my studies centered on the utilization of “natural supports.”

### Natural Supports as a Key Strategy

Several years ago, I started working with a group of adult service agencies that were participating in a grant-funded project that was examining the effectiveness of “natural support” strategies. Certainly, the definition of natural supports has been hotly debated, but I won’t belabor that point in this article. Suffice it to say, the idea of this project was to reduce job-coach involvement on worksites by developing alternative ways of providing support to workers with disabilities.

I’ll elaborate. Some supported employees participating in the project were trained by their non-disabled co-workers, rather than by job coaches. Other supported employees had their work area or tasks rearranged so they could better perform their jobs. Still others had

non-disabled co-workers as a kind of mentor. And some supported employees had their work schedule rearranged so it matched the local bus schedule.

You get the idea. The point was, rather than having job coaches do everything, service providers tried to develop new strategies so that the supported employee could receive whatever alternate job training was needed in order to be successful on the job. In addition, the supported employee, employer, and funding source (e.g. DVR) *all* approved the strategies implemented as part of the project.

### **Monetary Bonuses Handed Out**

An interesting twist to the project was that the adult service agencies were given a monetary bonus if the job coaches were able to reduce the amount of time they spent on the job site. Specifically, if the job coach was able to reduce support by 50% or more, the agency was given \$500. If the job coach could eliminate his job site services, the agency was given \$1,500. However, in order to receive the money, the supported employee had to keep the job. Moreover, job coaches could always go back and provide direct services if needed.

### **Startling Outcome Results**

For four years, I tracked the outcomes achieved by 85 supported employees with cognitive impairments who were provided natural supports through this project. During this time, I was also able to compare the costs of the services these individuals received to individuals with the same disabilities who received “traditional” job coaching.

What I discovered was startling. *Prior* to the start of the natural supports project, supported employees with cognitive disabilities at the participating agencies received services that cost an average of \$4,304 per year. Then, the natural supports initiative I’ve discussed was initiated.

The next year, supported employees with cognitive disabilities who participated in the natural supports project received services that cost an average of \$3,382 per year. This represented a 21.4% *reduction* compared to costs incurred prior to the project. Furthermore, over the next

few years, the average cost of services to supported employees who were trained with natural supports continued to decrease. By the fourth year of the project, the average cost of services was \$1,824 — or 57.6% lower than costs incurred prior to the intervention!

However, what was more impressive was that the supported employees who were trained using natural supports *retained* their jobs much longer than supported employees trained by traditional job-coaching strategies. Specifically, the “natural support supported employees” kept their positions in the community an average of 18.12 months, compared to only 10.08 months for “traditional supported employees.”

In other words, in addition to reducing costs by more than half, the natural supports strategies also seemed to increase the length of time supported employees were employed within their communities by nearly 80%! It was clearly a “win-win-win” situation: Supported employees were able to keep their positions longer, job coaches were able to work with more job seekers with disabilities, and taxpayers saved money.

### **Summary**

Of course, natural supports aren’t a good fit for every person with a disability. Job coaches should still use the training strategies that best suit the unique needs of the supported employee and their place of employment. However, as more and more funding is cut from human-service programs, job coaches must consider the costs of the services that they provide to supported employees. They must also find new and innovative ways to not only reduce the costs of services, but also improve the outcomes achieved by individuals with disabilities. By developing such strategies, everybody benefits.

For more information regarding this study, please contact me at [rcimera@kent.edu](mailto:rcimera@kent.edu) or consult: Cimera, R.E. (2007). Utilizing natural supports to reduce the costs of supported employment. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 32(3), 1-6. ■

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