

Maximizing Social Capital = Better Outcomes

By Corey Smith

Customized employment (CE) allows us to get off the beaten path of constantly filling entry-level service jobs. CE is a highly personalized approach to employment that requires us to: discover people's abilities as opposed to assessing their deficiencies; analyze social networks; build new relationships; and develop employment scenarios based on job seekers' "ideal conditions of employment."

CE de-emphasizes what Cary Griffin, Dave Hammis, and Tammara Geary refer to as the "big sign syndrome" approach to job development (think Wal-Mart, Target, etc). Their ideas are effectively captured in their newest book, *The Job Developers Handbook* (www.griffinhammis.com). (**Editor's note:** See also the October 2004 *Training Connection*.) The basic premise is that — rather than going to stores with "big signs" seeking ready-made jobs — supported employment specialists have much greater success using a CE approach with smaller employers to customize jobs and develop small businesses where individuals are not compared to those without disabilities. As a result, creative employment scenarios are more likely to occur.

Natural Supports

In addition to customized employment, developing "natural supports" — with an emphasis on "social capital" — is another crucial approach in creating better outcomes for job seekers with disabilities. Natural supports refer to personal associations and relationships that enhance people's quality of life. Examples include associations formed through participation in clubs, organizations and other civic activities, and in *workplaces*.

Today we know that most people with significant disabilities who maintain their jobs for long periods of time usually have high levels of natural support at work. In fact, I propose that attaining true economic self-sufficiency, desired community relation-

ships, and natural supports are attained by developing *social capital* in all aspects of our lives — both at work and in our personal relationships.

What is Social Capital?

Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone* and *Better Together*, defines social capital as: "the social networks and the norms of trustworthiness and reciprocity that arise from them." Putnam's research found that since the birth of television and the two-car family, we raise smaller families, build bigger houses, drive farther to work, and find our "busy lives" to be LONELY. In fact, the reality is that younger families are reporting that solving the problem of social isolation is even more important than becoming employed! And yet, Putnam offers hope and examples of "community building" that focus on economic development for all types of impoverished Americans.

As a result, it becomes evident that as people with significant disabilities leave segregated settings for lives and jobs in the community, their challenges with poverty and social isolation are very real. Consequently, much of our work as supported employment specialists needs to involve not only developing jobs, but also participating in community building. This starts with maximizing the social capital for the people we serve, and the organizations that we represent.

Expanding Social Capital

We all have varying degrees of individual social capital in our lives — including friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and teammates. Unfortunately, many job seekers with disabilities have limited social capital because of limited life experiences. Many of their relationships are framed mainly by their deficiencies, problems, and need for support. Moreover, people with significant disabilities have historically had limited opportunities to "give back" due to society's focus on what they

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can't do, rather than on what they *can* do.

I once had the honor of helping a gentleman named Tom. He had four distinct disabilities, and he loved Polish polka music, which did not endear him to his housemates or the staff at his group home. In a sheltered workshop back in the 1980s it was pretty easy to see Tom as "deficient." However, there was a rumor that Tom could actually play the organ by ear. Through circumstances and a lot of social capital, we came up with a job opportunity for Tom playing the organ on weekends at a breakfast diner.

For years, Tom was beloved in his organ-playing role, which was a source of great pride to Tom and his family. Perhaps most important to Tom was that he had *friends at work* who enjoyed him and his music. Tom also enjoyed the BIG FREE breakfast his employer provided, which was nothing like his low-calorie diet at the group home. Tom also liked being paid \$10 an hour, plus tips, and he was even given the opportunity to play a REASONABLE number of Polish polkas each shift! I wish you could have seen the look on his group home manager's face when we delivered the baby grand piano that Tom purchased with his musicians' wages. Tom's employer was always very supportive and positive, and the media attention and increased customer base that Tom attracted didn't hurt either.

Many Types of Social Capital

John Kretzmann and John McKnight, authors of *Building Communities From the Inside Out*, have been proponents of social capital and community building for years. Kretzmann and McKnight state that there are many types of social capital including: individual, community, associations, and public and private organizations. The following are two examples of how different types of social capital can expand community-building efforts and develop customized jobs for job seekers with disabilities.

I was recently asked to help a group of parents who were taking over an outdated advocacy organization. I agreed to help and provide consulting and training for free since most of it was going to be done in the community where I live. Some parents were surprised as I continued to say, "Sure," to a long list of requests.

As time passed, we built trust and I was able to share my vision for their children. One of the ladies

in the group later shared that her husband was the County Director for Economic Development and she would be willing to get us together for dinner. Since I am an employment specialist, getting to know her husband has become a real bonus for me in helping this group's association.

The organization that I work for, Via of the Lehigh Valley, recently began working with a young man who had previously been deemed unemployable. This young man loved the park across the street from his home and had done volunteer work there for years. His father is a local minister, while mom knows everybody in town. The family did not want their son sitting home and being unemployed. As a result, they used their high level of community social capital to find volunteers to work with their son. They knew members of the local Chamber of Commerce and Parks Board through their church.

A number of community members used their social capital to arrange a meeting with the Parks Board. It turned out that the park had a tight budget and their staff was using outdated pool skimmers, spending \$4,000 a year to clean the pool. Our organization used our public organization social capital to attain grant funds to purchase a robotic pool skimmer that helped this young man attain a customized job.

Based on our success, Via's Board of Directors formed an Entrepreneurship Committee to support our efforts. A number of private sector businesses and economic development staff serve on this committee. Through this venture we have built new relationships and funding sources from a growing number of new economic development partners.

Summary

Developing social capital and community building requires being committed to discovering the untapped capacities of individual people, communities, associations, and organizations — and in building relationships that include high levels of reciprocity. Each community has community-building assets, but we need to learn how to better utilize them. ■

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