

High unemployment rates continue to be a major challenge for individuals with extensive support needs. These individuals are often unemployed or underemployed (Wehman et al. (2014), despite their desire and ability to work (Roux et al., 2013). In order to reduce challenges and help young adults with extensive support needs achieve better employment outcomes, it is imperative to use effective interventions. Supported employment is one intervention that has enabled people with extensive support needs to achieve employment in competitive, integrated work environments (Wehman et al., 2014).

What is Supported Employment?

WIOA (2014) defines supported employment (SE) as

competitive integrated employment, including customized employment, or employment in an integrated work setting in which an individual with a most significant disability, including a youth with a most significant disability, is working on a short-term basis toward competitive integrated employment, that is individualized and customized, consistent with the unique strengths, abilities, interests, and informed choice of the individual, including with ongoing support services for individuals with the most significant disabilities—

1. *for whom competitive integrated employment has not occurred; or*
2. *for whom competitive integrated employment has been interrupted or intermittent as a result of a most significant disability; and*
3. *who, because of the nature and severity of their disability, need intensive Supported Employment services and extended services (29 U.S.C. § 705(38).*

SE assists individuals with the most extensive support needs to achieve competitive integrated employment. SE demands specialized skills from service providers (i.e., employment specialists)

to achieve effectiveness. Employment specialists must be skilled in identifying consumer choices, securing funding, locating community jobs, interacting with parents, assisting with Supplemental Security Income (SSI) determination, arranging transportation, and effectively training clients to meet work standards (Wehman et al., 2014). SE consists of four phases—getting to know the job seeker, job development and matching, training and support, and job retention services (see Table 1).

Table 1
Phases of Implementing SE

<p>Getting to know the job seeker</p> <p>An employment specialist reviews the individual’s relevant records, conducts interviews, situational assessments, and home visits to identify the individual’s interests, strengths, abilities, and support needs for obtaining and maintaining employment.</p>
<p>Job development and matching</p> <p>An employment specialist contacts community businesses aligned with the individual’s interests, conducts a thorough job analysis, and determines which job is the best match for both the job seeker and business.</p>
<p>Training and support</p> <p>An employment specialist assists the individual to learn specific job tasks and how to navigate the work environment; support is faded over time.</p>
<p>Job retention services</p> <p>An employment specialist checks in on the individual and employer monthly to address concerns.</p>

Note: Phases and descriptions were developed from Schall et al. (2015)

What the Research Says

Several studies provide evidence that SE is an effective program for improving employment outcomes for transition-aged youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. For example, Wehman and colleagues (2014) examined employment outcomes for youth and young adults (ages 16-25) with intellectual and developmental disabilities and found that individuals who received SE had consistently higher rates of employment than individuals that did not receive SE. Additionally, the impact of SE was greatest for individuals with intellectual disability or autism who received Social Security benefits, were enrolled in special education during high school, and graduated from high school. Similarly, Iwanaga et al. (2023) found that individuals with intellectual disability (ages 16-36) who received SE were more likely to reach competitive integrated employment, earn more money, and work more hours weekly than those that did not receive SE. Of importance, the rate of successful employment for transition-age youth and young adults with intellectual disability who received SE services was 71% as compared to 43% for the group that did not receive SE services.

Guidelines for Practice

SE is an evidenced-based practice found to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Wehman et al., 2018). Despite its success, there are several important factors that could impact the quality of SE services and outcomes. The following are possible factors and considerations for transition personnel.

- **Use with unintended population** – SE is often utilized to help individuals with less extensive support needs find employment. However, SE was created especially for those with the most extensive support needs who have difficulty achieving competitive integrated employment. Transition personnel may need to advocate for students with the most extensive support needs to be included in SE and be prepared to demonstrate their students' potential for successful employment.
- **Training of employment specialists** – The quality of SE depends on those delivering the services. Although employment specialists are trained professionals, their experience working with individuals with extensive support needs may be limited. Transition personnel can assist employment specialists by sharing information about instructional strategies, assistive technology, communication techniques, and behavior supports that are effective with the student.
- **Poor job matches** – Frequently, a job seeker with a disability finds themselves working in a position that is readily available but not a good match. To avoid this potential pitfall, educators should provide students with ongoing vocational assessments while in high school and share the assessment data with employment specialists. These assessments will assist employment specialists to identify jobs that align with the student's interests, preferences, and strengths.

Additional Resources

Supported Employment

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brdosCwEhTA>

This video discusses best practices in supported employment.

Supported Employment Quality Features

<https://bit.ly/3Xj29ei>

This document describes the features of high-quality supported employment.

References

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