

Individuals with disabilities are employed at a lower rate than individuals without disabilities. To address this gap, it is important for educators, family members, employers, and community leaders to work collaboratively to expand employment opportunities. One collaborative approach for accomplishing this goal is *community conversations*.

What are Community Conversations?

The purpose of community conversations is to engage members of the community in identifying practical solutions for addressing shared concerns (Carter & Bumble, 2018). The process begins with a local planning team that clarifies concerns, develops discussion questions, arranges event logistics for the event, and invites community members with diverse perspectives. Community conversations typically last two hours. Participants engage in three structured round table discussions followed by one large group discussion. After the event, ideas that emerge are organized by the local planning team and used to create change within the community.

What the Research Says

Community conversations are a promising approach for identifying ideas for expanding employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Through this approach community members have generated numerous solutions and strategies for increasing employment (see Table 1). Although the ideas that work in one community may not be appropriate for another community, this body of research provides a starting point for helping other communities understand possible actions for expanding employment options.

The success of a community conversation appears dependent on how the event is organized. Factors associated with successful events include having an effective planning team, involving people with disabilities, creating a comfortable setting, inviting

Table 1

Ideas for Expanding Employment Opportunities Generated from Community Conversations

Ideas and Strategies
<p>Develop Employment Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match skills and interests to existing jobs. • Develop accessible employment databases (job openings, resumes, resources). • Encourage businesses to mentor one another. • Provide training to new employers.
<p>Strengthen School and Transition Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve transition planning and instruction. • Organize business tours and job shadowing. • Discuss desired employment outcomes early. • Develop summer work programs. • Increase engagement with employers.
<p>Support Families in Transition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate families on the connection between home activities and gaining employment. • Support families when networking with employers. • Inform families of important timelines and expectations related to employment goals.
<p>Build Awareness for Inclusive Workplaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share employment success stories. • Educate and empower current employers. • Acknowledge businesses that are employing people with disabilities.
<p>Build Partnerships with Employers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a local community liaison for employers. • Encourage sharing of positive hiring practices. • Strengthen the referral process between providers and employers.
<p>Equip Competitive Applicants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build social and professional networks. • Develop employment skills and attitudes. • Access formal and natural community supports.

Note. Ideas taken from Bumble et al. (2018), Carter et al. (2016), Molfenter et al. (2018), and Raynor et al. (2018).

community members with diverse perspectives, having a “host” to facilitate conversations at each table, and providing a clear structure for the meetings (Bumble et al., 2018). Members of the community who have participated in community conversation events note several benefits (see Carter et al., 2016; Molfenter et al., 2018; Raynor et al., 2018; & Sinclair et al., 2021). Participants felt the events were a good use of their time and resulted in steps to enhance employment outcomes. They also indicated they learned more about resources available in their community, felt the community was in a good position to make changes, and believed their community would take action to employ more people with disabilities.

Guidelines for Practice

Community conversations can help generate strategies to expand employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Although the ideas and strategies described in Table 1 are drawn from prior community conversation events, they may be useful in other communities that are seeking to expand employment opportunities. In addition, the research literature offers several recommendations for organizing successful community conversations. Communities interested in offering a community conversation are encouraged to learn more about the process by examining items listed in the Additional Resources and References sections of this brief.

References

- Bumble, J. L., Carter, E. W., McMillan, E., Manikas, A. S., & Bethune, L. K. (2018). Community conversations on integrated employment: Examining individualization, influential factors, and impact. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 28(4), 229-243. doi: 10.1177/1044207317739401.
- Carter, E. W., Blustein, C. L., Bumble, J. L., Harvey, S., Henderson, L. M., & McMillan, E. D. (2016). Engaging communities in identifying local strategies for expanding integrated employment during and after high school. *American Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 121(5), 398-418. doi: 10.1352/1944-7558-121.5.398.

Additional Resources

Changing the Local Landscape through Community Conversations Webinar

youtu.be/u63x-Up6ia8

This ICTW webinar provides step-by-step instructions for how to conduct community conversations and utilize information gained from the process.

Community Conversations Toolkit

www.fecinclusion.org/uploads/1/3/5/8/135850103/community_conversation_toolkit_508c_1.pdf

This toolkit is a practical guide for families, educators, and community leaders who want to use community conversations to improve inclusive practices in their schools or programs.

- Carter, E. W., & Bumble, J. L. (2018). The promise and possibilities of community conversations: Expanding opportunities for people with disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 28(4), 195-202. doi: 10.1177/1044207317739408.
- Molfenter, N., Hartman, E., Neugart, J., Swedeen, B., Webb, S., Roskowski, M., & Schlegelmilch, A. (2018). Harnessing the power of community conversations to improve transition outcomes for youth with IDD. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 28(4), 216-228. doi: 10.1177/1044207317739406.
- Raynor, O., Hayward, K., Semenza, G., & Stoffmacher, B. (2018). Community conversations to increase employment opportunities for young adults with developmental disabilities in California. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 28(4), 203-215. doi: 10.1177/1044207317739405.
- Sinclair, J., Reardon, K., Bromley, K., Knowles, C., Cohen Lissman, D., & Kunze, M. (2021). Community conversations: Finding solutions to increase employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. *Developmental Disabilities Network Journal*, 2(1), 67-85.

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