WHAT WORKS:

Career–building strategies for people from diverse groups
A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

Persons with Developmental Disabilities

Statistics

Percentage of persons aged 15 and over who reported a developmental disability in 2006	2.9% of Albertans[1]
The most prevalent age group with developmental disabilities in Canada in 2006	15 to 24 year olds[2]
The developmental disability with the fastest growth rate in Canada	17% growth rate for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)[3]
Estimate of babies born in 10,000 in Canada each year with developmental disabilities	20 with Autistic Disorder (AD)[4] 15 with Pervasive Developmental Disorder–Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)[5] 5 with Asperger disorder[6] 90 with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)[7]
Participation of persons with disabilities in the labour force in 2006	56.2% in Canada 69.6% in Alberta[8]
Persons with disabilities who reported in 2006 that their condition limited their ability to work	12.6% of Albertans 9.9% of Canadians[9]

Context

> **Disabilities in *What Works* chapters**
>
> In *What Works*, disabilities are discussed in four separate chapters:
>
> *Persons with Developmental Disabilities*
> Includes persons with general developmental disabilities, as well as autism, Asperger disorder and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)
>
> *Persons with Learning Disabilities*
> Includes persons with disorders in functional use of oral and written language, reading and mathematics, as well as non-verbal learning disorders (NLD)
>
> *Persons with Physical and Neurological Disabilities*
> Physical disabilities includes sight, hearing and mobility disabilities, as well as chronic pain and autoimmune diseases
>
> Neurological disabilities includes acquired brain injury (ABI), epilepsy, Tourette syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
>
> *Persons with Mental Health Disabilities*
> Includes persons with anxiety disorders, eating disorders, mood disorders, personality disorders, schizophrenia, problem gambling and substance abuse, as well as co-existing diagnoses
>
> Counsellors may wish to read all four chapters for information and ideas that may be helpful for their client group.

Terminology and definitions

Disability is defined by Statistics Canada as "an activity limitation or participation restriction associated with a physical or mental condition or health problem."[10]

A *developmental disability* is defined as "a state of functioning that begins in childhood and is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual capacity and adaptive skills."[11] This term is generally used to describe life-long impairments that are attributable to mental, neurological and/or physical disabilities. The term is used to cover a variety of conditions that vary depending on when and by whom the term is used. Terms such as *learning disability*, *cognitive disability*, *intellectual disability*, *mental retardation* and *mental handicap* are synonyms typically used for developmental disability, although *mental retardation* and *mental handicap* are no longer considered acceptable terms.[12]

Three criteria are generally used to make the determination of developmental disability:

- significantly below average intellectual capacity evidenced by a sub-average performance on an individually administered intelligence test
- onset prior to age 18
- related limitations in two or more of the following adaptive skills areas
  - communication
  - home living
  - community use
  - health and leisure
  - self-care
  - social skills
  - self-direction
  - functional academics
  - work[13]

This definition incorporates intelligence test performance *and* the adaptive skill level of the individual. The consideration of adaptive skills recognizes a range of disabilities and therefore a range of services that individual clients might require.

Labels

"The institutional approach is full of labels."[14] Some labels are related to a diagnosis, while others are related to management of symptoms in people who have not been formally diagnosed. There may be a case for diagnosis and use of labels when they allow individuals to access to particular programs and/or funding. However, there is a danger of boxing a person in by using a label. Counsellors will want to remember to work with the person, not the label.

History and legislation

History of inclusion

The trend toward inclusion has resulted in the movement of persons with developmental disabilities away from sheltered living and working environments to inclusion in the community. This movement is supported by government policies that include funding and resources.

Since school systems expanded their special education services in the 1970s, young people with developmental disabilities have been graduating with expectations of their ability to take part in and contribute to working life. Inclusion reinforces the reality that these students are able to participate effectively in an integrated setting.

Inclusion means everyone is included in everything. No one is left out. "Community inclusion means having appropriate supports available to make choices possible; and…actively including developmentally disabled individuals in the community where they can make a contribution and be respected for their contribution."[15]

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Section 15 guarantees equality rights and freedom from discrimination for people who have a mental or physical disability, as well as for other categories of people who face discrimination.

Employment Equity Act

The *Employment Equity Act* defines persons with disabilities as individuals who have a long-term or recurring physical, mental, sensory, psychiatric or learning impairment, and who consider themselves to be disadvantaged in employment by reason of that impairment, or believe that an employer or potential employer is likely to consider them to be disadvantaged in employment by reason of that impairment.[16] Because this is a federal act, it is limited in scope and applies only to industries that are federally regulated.

Duty to accommodate

Duty to accommodate refers to the legal obligation to take appropriate steps to eliminate discrimination resulting from a rule, practice or barrier that has—or can have—an adverse impact on individuals with disabilities. A similar duty applies to other areas, such as reasonable accommodation for religious differences. Efforts to accommodate are required up to the point where the person or organization attempting to provide accommodation would suffer undue hardship by doing so. Undue hardship occurs if accommodation would create onerous conditions for an employer or service provider, for example, intolerable financial costs or serious disruption to business.[17]

Types of developmental disorders

This chapter provides information on the following developmental disabilities:

- general developmental disabilities
- autism spectrum disorders (includes autistic disorder and Asperger disorder)
- fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is considered both a developmental disability and a neurological disability. Information on ADHD is included in the *What Works* chapter titled *Persons with Physical and Neurological Disabilities*.

Persons with developmental disabilities generally

- have limited intellectual capacity
- are slower to learn and prefer reliability and consistency in processes and activities
- have a simple, unsophisticated understanding of things, which can be seen as a gift not a gap when it results in common sense
- benefit most from informal training or learning through participation in real-life activities
- have a co-existing condition or a dual-diagnosis[18]

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs)

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are lifelong neurological disorders that affect how the brain processes information.

Of the five ASDs, the three most common are

- autistic disorder (also called autism, classic autism and AD)
- pervasive developmental disorder–not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)
- Asperger disorder (also called AS, Asperger's syndrome)[19]

The term *spectrum* refers to a continuum of severity or developmental impairment. The conditions of children and adults with ASD cover a wide spectrum, with individual differences in

- number and particular kinds of symptoms
- severity of symptoms (mild to severe)
- age of onset
- levels of functioning
- challenges with social interactions[20]

"Individuals with ASD have varying degrees of difficulty in social interaction and communication and may show repetitive behaviours and have unusual attachments to objects or routines."[21]

Persons with ASD are characterized by challenges in

- communication
- social interaction
- learning
- behaviour
- perceptions
- interests
- activities

Asperger disorder is considered a high-functioning type of autism and tends to be recognized and diagnosed later in life. Development of learning is not usually delayed.[22]

Clients with high-functioning autism or Asperger disorder may be able to work successfully in mainstream jobs. Nevertheless, communication and social problems often cause difficulties in many areas of life. Adults with ASD need encouragement and support in their struggle for an independent life.[23]

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is a term used to describe the range of physical and/or mental disabilities that can result from prenatal exposure to alcohol. FASD is not a diagnosis. It is an umbrella term that encompasses these conditions:

- fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)
- partial FAS (pFAS) or fetal alcohol effects (FAE)
- alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND)
- alcohol-related birth defects[24]

Prenatal exposure to alcohol can cause facial abnormalities, growth deficiencies and damage to the central nervous system, which can result in

- developmental delays
- intellectual deficits and learning disabilities
- hyperactivity
- attention and/or memory deficits
- inability to manage anger
- difficulties with problem solving
- skull and brain malformation
- neurological abnormalities[25]

"Adults with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) face serious challenges because of physical, cognitive and behavioural deficits. The interaction of behavioural and mental health problems with adverse environments leads to further problems, such as trouble with the law, called *secondary disabilities.*"[26]

Examples of secondary disabilities include

- mental health problems
- disrupted school experience, such as suspension, expulsion or dropping out
- trouble with the law or with authorities, such as being convicted of a crime
- confinement for in-patient treatment for mental health or drug/alcohol problems
- incarceration for a crime
- inappropriate sexual behaviour
- alcohol or drug problems
- problems with employment, dependent living and parenting[27]

Inclusion

The concept of inclusion of persons with developmental disabilities brings with it the corresponding growth in inclusive education, inclusive employment and inclusive community living arrangements. Because inclusion is a relatively recent development, many persons with developmental disabilities have not had life experiences that foster a belief in themselves and in a future that includes education, work and recreation in an inclusive environment. Such people may be unprepared and may not have expected to work and have a career. Correspondingly, employers and co-workers may not be prepared for inclusion because of a lack of knowledge, experience and preparation.

Persons with developmental disabilities are being given more support to overcome many barriers to employment. Government policy has changed, taking more active measures to support employment of persons with developmental disabilities while continuing to provide support, such as health benefits.

Inclusion of persons with developmental disabilities in an increasingly diverse workforce makes sound economic sense. People with developmental disabilities bring unique skill sets and a valuable perspective to the workplace. They and their friends and relatives provide a significant potential customer base to businesses that employ them.

An important role for counsellors will be to help clients with developmental disabilities recognize and build on their strengths and fully access supports available to gain work in a competitive workplace.

Counsellors can help people with developmental disabilities to integrate into the workplace in two ways: first, they can help clients become aware of their assets and the opportunities in the community to use those assets; and second, they can help the employment community become aware of the enormous potential for employment of persons with developmental disabilities.

Social and life management skills

Experiences in inclusive settings increase the opportunities for clients to build social and life management skills. These skills are extremely valuable for the competitive workforce. As inclusion in education becomes firmly established, clients have the opportunity to build social relationships with a cross-section of community members who may then become allies with regard to career building.

Barriers and challenges

This chart shows the effects that a developmental disability can have on a person's major life activities. The chart identifies the extremes—there are many variations in the continuum and in the combinations of disabilities.[28]

Major life activity	Without support clients may have challenges such as:	Clients may benefit from
Self-care	Difficulty eating, preparing food; difficulty with hygiene	Assistance in personal care
Receptive/expressive language	Limited or no use of voice; inability to articulate ideas; inability to understand abstract ideas	Assistance with communication
Learning	Slower to learn; inability to perform routine age-appropriate academic activities	Assistance through special attention/programs
Mobility	Impaired fine or gross motor skills	Assistance from persons or devices
Self-direction	Difficulty choosing among options	Assistance in decision-making process
Capacity for independent living	Limited ability to relate to community to satisfy personal, social and health needs	In-home support including training regarding health and safety, hygiene and daily living activities
	Difficulty managing travel to and from work/recreational outings	Assistance in learning to use supports in managing independent travel
Economic self-sufficiency	Difficulty in gaining employment and maintaining earnings above poverty line	Assistance in learning to use supports in competitive work environment

Clients' financial concerns

Clients may be recipients of public financial supports, such as a pension plan, a long-term disability pension or income support. They may have the qualifications and the desire to work but may fear jeopardizing their benefits if they take a full-time job. Considering that persons with developmental disabilities often include medical costs among their basic needs, many feel getting a job and potentially losing their medical benefits is too big a risk to take. In addition, some fear losing benefits, not just because of the cost, but also because of the difficulty in reinstating benefits if the job does not last.

Individuals in Alberta who receive financial assistance are encouraged to maximize self-sufficiency, which for some clients means working. Individuals who are working while receiving financial assistance may receive a supplement to their earning. In calculations of benefits, a portion of the client's wages may be exempt. In Alberta, people leaving income assistance for jobs may continue to receive health benefits both for themselves and their children.

Counsellors are encouraged to become familiar with financial assistance programs. Encourage clients to get more information about income exemptions and health coverage before dismissing the possibility of employment.[29]

Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

What do I wish I would have known when I started working with persons with developmental disabilities?

"In general, in my education and experience, I was led to believe that the hopes, dreams and aspirations of persons with developmental disabilities were different from everyone else… and that's not true. We all want to have family involvement, to have loved ones in our lives, to have jobs and careers. I had to really look and think about things differently to 'get' this."

Tim Weinkauf

Alberta Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program

Qualities of effective counsellors

Counsellors' personal beliefs

Basic beliefs about persons with developmental disabilities influence how counsellors relate to clients. Reflect on your own values, beliefs and assumptions with respect to developmental disability as an aspect of social identity.

Career counselling is likely to be effective when based on these ideas:

- Each person with a developmental disability deserves to be treated as a unique individual.
- Labels should be avoided whenever possible.[30]
- Persons with developmental disabilities have a limitless potential for becoming not what we desire them to be, but what it is within them to become.[31]
- There are many ways to accomplish the same task. Be open to the possibilities and exercise creativity.
- Everyone has some form of disability. Career development can be a vehicle for growth for persons with disabilities.
- It is important to emphasize abilities, not disabilities, and to examine how society defines success.[32]
- People change or modify their jobs to focus on abilities and to avoid shortcomings.
- Accommodations are seldom costly, and these modifications can benefit other employees as well.[33]

Communicating with clients

Use *plain language*—language appropriate to the level of the reader or listener that is straightforward and without jargon. It is clear, concise and well organized.[34]

Use of the term *plain language* usually refers to written text, but its use is encouraged for oral language as well.

Communicating with clients with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

Counsellors may want to use these suggestions:

- Use a directive, action-oriented, situationally based approach.
- Model the behaviours you expect the client to demonstrate, such as being calm and focused.
- Make appropriate referrals to address substance abuse and/or personality disorders.
- Provide a high degree of structure.
- Contact your local provincial or territorial substance abuse office for information regarding FASD support organizations.[35]

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De-escalation of volatile situations

If the need to diffuse a volatile situation arises, counsellors may want to be prepared to use these strategies:

- Don't bring up emotionally charged topics or concerns.

- As soon as possible, encourage the client to make some choices. This strategy helps the client to regain some control over the situation and decreases the danger of the volatility continuing.

- Slow the situation down. What's causing the volatility? Remove the person or object that's the focus of frustration. Let the client talk.

- Be aware of the client's personal space. If you are within it, she or he might feel attacked. Give the client more space than normal. Keep listening.

- Ask the client "What would you like to do?" or "What would help you?" Ask if intervention is needed.

- Don't appeal to logic. Don't try to talk the client out of it or argue.

- When you do speak, talk slowly and in a non-confrontational manner. Agree with the client when appropriate. Say something positive.

- Use body language that conveys calmness. Don't move suddenly or speak in an authoritarian tone.

- Be aware that the situation might worsen and that it is important to get help.

Career counselling approaches

Here are some counselling approaches that are particularly effective with persons with developmental disabilities:

- Establish a warm, supportive, trusting environment.

- Avoid anxiety-producing situations, such as testing conditions.

- Provide encouragement and positive reinforcement, patience and support.

- Build recognition, praise, progress charts and special rewards into activities.

- Work frequently with clients and over a period of time.

- Provide group experiences as opportunities to practise verbal expression, explore occupational interests and discuss personal concerns.

- Show pictures and visit businesses and industries to expose clients to job and workplace information and other life roles.

- Adapt or modify material as necessary and use a range of resources.

- Be creative and don't be afraid to experiment.[36]

Begin by gathering information about the client's strengths, hopes for the future, likes, dislikes and needs. Family, support workers and former teachers will be important resources for this information, particularly for clients who do not communicate in a traditional manner. Information regarding general disability-related supports, which clients will require, is important at this stage, as is addressing needs for financial support.

It may be helpful to gather information about clients by

- interviewing clients and their family members/group home workers

- observing clients in different environments

- reviewing records and evaluations of previous experiences

- visiting clients repeatedly and communicating with clients and their families in familiar surroundings

- offering short-term assessment and trial work experiences

- arranging on-site visits to different businesses in the community[37]

Referrals for assessment

Some clients with developmental disabilities will have been assessed or diagnosed by professionals. If you feel an assessment is required or would prove to be beneficial for your counselling, refer the client to the appropriate agency. An assessment might be required to confirm whether a client has a developmental disability and/or another type of disability for funding or training eligibility. Because assessment or testing may be intimidating, it might be helpful to involve family and support people to minimize the client's discomfort.

Essential lifestyle planning approach

The essential lifestyle planning (ELP) approach is "a guided process for learning how someone wants to live and for developing a plan to help make it happen."[38] This approach uses additional terms to refer to the process of person-centred planning, including

- personal futures planning
- PATH (Pre-vocational Assessment, Treatment and Habilitation)
- individual service design
- 24-hour planning and whole life planning[39]

Person-centred planning model

"Person-centred planning is a process-oriented approach to empowering people with disability labels. It focuses on the people and their needs by putting them in charge of defining the direction for their lives, not on the systems that may or may not be available to serve them. This ultimately leads to greater inclusion as valued members of both community and society."[40]

Six factors have been identified that influence the effective implementation of person-centred processes, including

- clearly defined roles
- personal relationship with the focus person
- desire for change
- creation of a personal vision
- commitment to planning and follow-up
- flexibility of resources[41]

Helping to change lives

"Good plans reflect the perceptions of the focus person and those who know and care about him or her. Learning how people want to live is just the beginning, the foundation. Helping people have their own lives requires changing:

- how we think
- how we are organized; and
- how we act."[42]

Michael Smull
Essential Lifestyle Planning

Here are some considerations when using person-centred planning:

- "…be 'sensibly unrealistic' in looking past what people have already been, to the more elusive, but powerfully formative question of what they might someday become…'Person centeredness' cannot be just about the person we have already seen, [sic] there must be allowances for the person that might yet be."[43]
- "Ensure the plan is truly person-centred, take time to get to know the person, her gifts, her dreams and her needs."[44]
- "Person-centred plans [must] reflect language and goals that are meaningful to the individual."[45]
- It's a 'vision-quest' experience. Get to know people and their vocational aspirations. Don't discount their dreams. Find ways of helping them become involved in those areas.
- Avoid placing personal limits on what people can do. Find out what attracts people to the area they are choosing and look for ways to support them in becoming involved.

Generally, the research suggests that person-centred planning is related to increased autonomy in choice making for individuals participating in the process. This is particularly significant for clients with developmental disabilities, who have not always been offered this right.[46]

While person-centred planning is seen to promote autonomy in choice making, "[m]any people assume that the presence of an intellectual disability precludes a person from becoming self-determined."[47] Living in an environment that provides opportunities to make choices and to exert control over life is a more significant factor contributing to self-determination and autonomous functioning than intellectual capacity.[48]

Inclusive post-secondary education

Inclusive schooling now extends to the post-secondary level where a variety of institutions offer programs. Adults who have been labelled severely, profoundly and multiply disabled have successfully participated in these programs.

Inclusive post-secondary education for persons with developmental disabilities lays the foundation for transition into an inclusive community and the competitive workforce.

The programs provide the following advantages to participants:

- the means and experiences to develop career-related skills and aptitudes
- life-enriching experiences that assist in the transition into adulthood and community life
- natural pathways to gain access to experts and optimum learning environments
- practicum experiences that can lead to employment opportunities in the competitive workplace
- increased self-confidence and development of social skills
- decreased need for paid support workers

Focusing on Employment

Persons with developmental disabilities are employed in a broad variety of settings, including self-employment. Traditionally, promotion of the employment of persons with developmental disabilities came from a human service model and was viewed as providing a community service. Promotion of employment from a business model is now taking hold. Inclusion of persons with developmental disabilities in our increasingly diverse workforce makes sound economic sense for employers.

Exploring work alternatives

Entry-level jobs

"As long as the person is working at a real job that needs to be done, a job that she chose from among various possibilities and that an employer is willing to pay at least minimum wage for, there's nothing demeaning about it. The most demeaning condition is to have no job at all or to be stuck in a 'pre-vocational' placement. Too often, 'pre-' means 'never.' "[49]

James McKelvey
Author, Simply for the Love of It

Persons with developmental disabilities frequently find employment in lower paying, entry-level jobs. As participation in inclusive post-secondary education continues to grow and as person-centred planning approaches are implemented, the variety and level of work available for these clients will continue to expand.

Counsellors are encouraged to be creative and innovative in providing support to clients with developmental disabilities in pursuing their chosen fields of work. For example, a client hoping to become a police officer may not be able to perform that exact job but can be supported to move forward to work in the area of security. Another person interested in being a nurse may not have the skills and knowledge to perform that job but can be supported to work in a nursing or health-care setting.

Supported employment

> **Building a support network**
>
> "If we believe people are different, we provide support to them in a different way—a way that reinforces difference and further separates them from their co-workers. Specialized, segregated supports that continue to emphasize differences aren't what people want. There is a more natural way of supporting people by also supporting employers and co-workers to understand how they can be part of the support network in the workplace."
>
> Tim Weinkauf
> Alberta Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program

Supported employment is "*real work* in an *integrated setting* with *ongoing support* provided by an agency with expertise in finding employment for people with disabilities."[50]

Definitions of the terms in *supported employment* are essential to understanding this approach:

- *Real work* is work that would be done by a typical member of the workforce if it were not done by the worker with a disability.

- Supported employment placements are *real work*, not vocational training, work experience or work preparation.

- An *integrated setting* is where the proportion of disabled workers is roughly equivalent to the proportion of people with disabilities in the general population. (Large work crews or *enclaves*, where disabled people work together on one site, are excluded from this definition.)

- *Ongoing support* includes job-support services that are, theoretically, not time limited. Support is provided for as long as the worker needs it in order to perform the work satisfactorily.[51]

Inviting employer participation and responding to business needs for a reliable labour source are important ways to facilitate the expansion of supported employment.[52] After asking companies to make accommodations to the service system when hiring a supported employee, the next step is to answer the following questions:

- How can support be provided effectively to employers instead of only to employees with disabilities?

- What roles are co-workers already providing to employees with disabilities?

- What range of job accommodations can be used for employees with differing abilities?

- How do companies benefit from increasing their capacity to hire, train and supervise employees with severe disabilities?[53]

Supported employment opportunities are typically provided through referrals to specialized community agencies. If you are counselling in an area where more than one agency exists for persons with developmental disabilities, it will be helpful to discuss the preferred agency with clients and their families or guardians. You may also want to consider supported employment services based on the following guiding principles.

Best practices for supported employment

The Alberta Association for Supported Employment has identified the following guiding principles to assist in the development and implementation of best practices in supported employment services:

- "Design all processes, strategies or philosophies to promote greater workforce inclusion, personal choice and independence for persons with disabilities.

- Do not allow processes, strategies or philosophies to interfere with building personal capacity or reducing poverty for persons with disabilities.

- Ensure that any interventions used are those that are the least intrusive, most respectful and most effective strategies available.

- Strive to maintain or improve your service standards."[54]

- Conduct assessment and planning which reflects person-centred support, choice and self-determination.

- Foster and facilitate career goals within the context of the individual's lifestyle, non-work priorities, goals and commitments.[55]

Dealing with employers

Employers can be encouraged to hire persons with disabilities for the following benefits:

- *Competitive advantage*. Employees and their networks represent a cross-section of potential customers.

- *Unique perspectives and creativity*. Skills developed in overcoming obstacles and compensating for deficits are an asset to the business.

- *Improve company image.* Hiring persons with disabilities improves the community's impression of that business. Good corporate citizenship is an important trend right now.

- *Larger human resource pool*. By using new technologies and accessing employment specialists, these employees make valuable contributions to the workplace.

- *Improved workplace culture*. A diverse workplace is more interesting and rewarding.

- *Preparation for the future.* Learning how to accommodate employees with disabilities now prepares businesses for accommodating aging customers with disabilities for the future.[56]

Disclosure to employers

People with disabilities may be concerned that disclosure may limit job prospects or advancement opportunities due to misconceptions, stereotypes or generalizations. They are also concerned that they may be offered a token position to fill an employment equity target. They would rather be hired for their abilities, not their disabilities.[57]

There are clients with disabilities who have no choice but to disclose in order to pass employment entrance tests, complete job advancement courses, or complete assigned work within narrowly established parameters. Many would be able to perform more efficiently on the job if they were able to arrange for some simple accommodations, such as a quieter workspace, access to a computer or instructions in alternative formats.

Ultimately, the choice to disclose rests with the individual, who must evaluate each situation based on thorough research of diverse factors that include

- personal needs
- job descriptions
- possible accommodations required during or after the selection process
- the organization's sensitization to disability issues

Perhaps the more important question a client must ask himself or herself is not whether to tell or not to tell, but rather the consequences of not telling. Can the client do the without accommodations? If the answer is no, the client (or the parent, guardian or advocate) needs to consider the following:

- How severe is the developmental disability?
- How much does the nature or manifestation of the disability conflict with the needs of the job or educational program?

- How open is the employer or educational program to recognizing and accommodating the client?
- If there is a union in the workplace, what is its position toward and willingness to support members with developmental disabilities?

If clients wish to have accommodations made on the job, disclosure will be necessary. Also relevant is the fact that talking about the disability in an interview or on an application form can shift the focus from the abilities to disabilities.[58]

The following suggestions regarding disclosing information to prospective employers may be useful:

- Do not use medical terms, but describe the disability by its job-related outcomes
- Have a current assessment of their disabilities with recommendations of how they may be accommodated on the job.
- Know and state your strengths.
- Know your needs in relation to the job.
- Look for support and networking opportunities in the workplace.
- Understand the role of the union, if applicable.
- Understand that asking for accommodations is a reasonable request.[59]

Disclosing a disability requires a lot of thought and planning. Clients should carefully plan how they wish to disclose and know the implications of this action. Employees and/or candidates may first want to reveal a little bit of information at a time in order to establish a level of comfort and trust. Ultimately, the candidate must decide the time, the place and the degree of information to share with others.[60]

Job accommodations

Job accommodations are reasonable modifications, adjustments and equipment acquisitions that employers make to accommodate the needs of employees with disabilities. For clients with developmental disabilities, accommodations may include

- electronic spelling correction
- memory aids, such as post-it notes and cue sheets
- use of natural design principles—visibility, feedback, usability—to create equipment that can be used without having to think about how it works
- computers that can produce synthesized speech
- large brightly coloured labels with symbols for caution, warning and emergency
- instructions placed close to referred items
- timers, talking or digital, to time tasks and breaks
- talking calculators and tools
- use of facilitators, buddies, colleagues and coaches
- self-operated prompting strategies, such as pictures
- minimizing clutter
- avoiding frequent changes in duties, schedules and rearrangement of goods
- co-workers and supervisors sensitized to working with persons with developmental disabilities[61]

Disability Related Employment Supports

Disability Related Employment Supports (DRES) from the Government of Alberta may be available to eligible individuals with documented permanent or chronic disabilities (qualified clients with documented and permanent or long-term disabilities). DRES is available in the form of supports or services to reduce, alleviate, or remove the barriers for education, training, job search and/or employment. Examples include assistive technologies, installations or worksite modifications, sign language interpreters or specific disability-related software.[62]

In Conclusion

Counsellors can be a great resource in helping clients with developmental disabilities achieve meaningful work in inclusive settings. Helping clients through the career-building process to take full advantage of supports available, such as job accommodations and appropriate financial assistance, encourages clients to build on their strengths and maximize their potential in a competitive workplace.

Endnotes

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