ABSTRACT

Many people with intellectual disabilities do not make the transition from school to competitive employment in spite of innovative initiatives.

Rusch et al. (1986) have found that the greatest difficulty on people with intellectual disability maintaining employment relates to their lack of vocational social skills. However, few studies have focussed on vocational competent young adults with intellectual disabilities to determine the factors for their success.

This paper reports a qualitative research study of vocationally competent people with intellectual disabilities. The study aimed to determine the important factors inside and outside of the individual
that allowed them to achieve this competency.

The subjects ranged in age from 19-30 years and were clients of a Competitive Employment and Training Program. They were purposefully sampled using an objective test and the criteria of having maintained employment for 3 months after support was withdrawn by the employment agency.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the subjects and key people with whom they interacted (e.g. administrators, job trainers, employers and parents).

The results indicate that employment-related social skills combined with a strong work ethic are crucial to the maintenance of competitive employment for people with intellectual disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities have come to expect that they should be able to participate as fully and as autonomously as possible in social and economic life. Competitive employment is seen by most individuals as a "major and essential means of gaining income, enhancing self-esteem and increasing quality of life, options and opportunities" (Riches, 1993, p.1).

Competitive employment offers numerous advantages to people with disabilities (Rusch, 1986). Competitive employment involves "placement in community-integrated settings in which the employee receives at least minimum wage, interacts with non handicapped co-workers and produces valued goods and services and has opportunities for increased earnings and responsibilities" (Rusch, 1986, p.5).

There is overwhelming research evidence which shows that the vast majority of people with a developmental disability can function in open employment (Riches, 1980). However, the present situation both in Australia and overseas is quite bleak (Ling et al, 1994). Kiernan and Stark (1986) found that 74% to 85% of adults with developmental disabilities in the U.S. are either unemployed or not in open employment. Wehman et al (1985) indicated that the unemployment rate for "mentally retarded" young adults was 58%; almost three quarters of those who were employed earned less than $500 per month; and most of those employed had gained their jobs through family members or friends. In a more recent study, Haring and Lovett (1990) found that only 6% of their sample of young adults with an intellectual disability were competitively employed.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (1990) data indicated that the labour force participation rate of people with disabilities was 46% compared
with 72% of all persons or all persons aged 15 to 64 years. Also, two years after leaving high school less than 50% of all young people with disabilities had found employment. (Ling et al, 1993)

Therefore, despite the development over the last fifteen years of a variety of approaches (work experience, community service, subsidised work introduction, specialised units for work introduction and transitional-employment programs) overseas, we are far from achieving the goal of obtaining and maintaining competitive employment for many young people with disabilities.

Extensive vocational programs have been initiated to improve outcomes for people with disabilities. However, as the success rate of these programs is limited there is a need to improve them. The social problems associated with long-term unemployment of people with disabilities has serious implications for the community and for policy making.

The project to be described is a study of young adults with an intellectual disability who want to move into the competitive work force. Many people with disabilities do not make the transition from school to competitive employment in spite of many innovative initiatives (Ling et al, 1993).

In an effort to address some of these difficulties, government initiatives have led to the establishment of competitive employment and training programs. One of these innovative programs established in the Macarthur Region is the Macarthur Area Training and Employment Service (MATES). The Macarthur Region of south western Sydney has one of the highest unemployment rates in New South Wales. The service known as MATES was developed by the Macarthur and District Association for the Disabled (MADAD) in response to the need for an employment placement and ongoing support service for people with a mild disability.

SOCIAL COMPETENCE

There is now a wide body of research that has demonstrated the importance of social competence to success in community employment for persons with disabilities (Butterworth and Strauch, 1994 p.118). Most researchers feel that social competence plays a critical role in maintaining jobs for people with disabilities (Calkins and Walker, 1989; Chadsey-Rusch, 1992; Lignugaris-Kraft, Salzberg, Rule and Stowitschek, 1988; Storey and Knutson, 1989).

Social skills which are important in the work-place include the ability to accept criticism from a supervisor, the ability to interact with coworkers, and ringing if you are going to be late or if you are ill. The lack of these skills leads to low efficiency in the maintenance of
long-term placement of people with intellectual disabilities.

Research has emphasised the importance of social competence in determining success in competitive employment for people with disabilities but has focussed primarily on maladaptive and disruptive social behaviours that have led to job losses, rather than any investigation of the social competencies that have contributed to successful placement and job maintenance (Chadsey-Rusch, 1992).

Further, nearly all studies have concentrated on the evaluations of social competence by significant others. Few, if any, studies have examined this concept from the perspective of clients with intellectual disabilities who have been successful in the competitive workforce.

METHODOLOGY

Design

A case-study methodology was employed using a qualitative research approach. The case studies were analysed by a method developed by Calvez, based on the theoretical perspective of Douglas (1977; 1982; 1990). This approach has been used previously by Calvez in an analysis of social integration of people with an intellectual disability in Brittany (1990a & b) and in a study of the social integration of children with an intellectual disability (Gow, Calvez, Balla, Levi, Dixon and Reddacliffe, 1993).

The analysis of the interviews is intended to analyse and explore the participants' experiences from their own perspective and from the perspective of the other interviewees. Qualitative research methods have already been employed by the senior researcher in another project involving adults with intellectual disabilities. These methods were found to not only be appropriate tools to answer the research question but they were judged to be appropriate for subjects with disabilities as questions could be reframed, leads could be followed and there were no time constraints on the completion of any questionnaires (Gow, Calvez, Fitzgerald, Reddacliffe, Dixon and Levi, 1993).

In-depth case studies of this group were developed to describe the factors inside and outside the individual that have contributed to perceived competence in vocational settings.

Subjects

The study focuses on a group of clients of the employment agency (n=10) who are perceived as vocationally competent. Subjects ranged in age from 19 to 30 years who have been previously been purposefully sampled
(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The subjects' summary data are described in Table 1.

Sampling

The Test of Interpersonal Competence for Employment (TICE) was administered orally and in a one-to-one situation because of the level of intellectual disability of the clients. Administrators and trainers involved in Mates were asked to nominate subjects who they perceived as being vocationally competent. Those subjects who were identified as having the best vocational skills from all sources were selected.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with each of the vocationally competent subjects. Interviews were taped and detailed written notes taken on the semi-structured interview schedule.

The tapes were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after each interview. These transcriptions were then edited by the interviewer and the senior researcher. This allowed data collection and data analysis to occur concurrently.

Semi-Structured Interview Development

An interview schedule was developed through a three step process. First, a content analysis of the literature on transition and vocational services for people with intellectual disabilities was conducted. This was used to guide the development of a list of possible questions. Secondly, instructors, clients and parents were asked to suggest issues that should be covered. Finally, a draft of the schedule was developed from the amended list of questions and was shown to job trainers, employers and people with intellectual disabilities, not included in the sample. This provided feedback on comprehensiveness, clarity, relevance and coverage of salient issues.

The interview questions probed (1) vocational self-esteem, (2) how personal individual needs were met, (3) effectiveness of support in getting and keeping a job, and (4) vocational and social goals.

The interview schedule was only a guide to topics covered in the interview. Interviewers were encouraged to follow the subjects lead, to rephrase questions if necessary and not follow the schedule in a lock step fashion (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The interviewer initiated an indirect line of questioning and asked the participants to relate their life histories to further elucidate why these people have been vocationally successful.

Data analysis
The techniques used to analyse the interview transcripts include coding (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984), memo writing (Strauss, 1987) and domain analysis (Spradley, 1979). Coding categories were developed collaboratively by the researchers after independent reading of all of the interview transcripts. Once the initial coding was complete the data was sorted into categories and analysis of over-arching themes done. Domain analysis was used to understand semantic relationships to provide illustrations of themes and to clarify meaning.

RESULTS

Many themes emerged as a result of the preliminary analysis of the interviews. One of the most significant related to social competence was the participants' understanding of why they had been successful and what qualities they possessed that made them a good worker.

THE GOOD WORKER

Something to offer - personal capital

Many clients identified different qualities but they could be conceptualised as seeing themselves as having personal capital or something to offer.

"I am not extremely fast on typing but that will come in time I guess"

Another client saw his positive qualities as relating to his verbal abilities. He likes to be helpful and willingly does extra work

".. I can do anything if I put my mind to it ..."

Conventional work-related social competencies

Other qualities that were identified by clients were more conventionally related to success in the workplace such as punctuality, honesty, complying with supervisors requests and being seen as really wanting to work. Clients expressed willingness to do any job-related task. Also, some clients identified being able to work independently as a very positive quality that had contributed to their success.

"A person who arrives at work on time"
"They have to be honest. They have to be wanting to do the work"
"Do as you are told when they want you to do stuff .."
"I don't need to be supervised"
"I get on with all the management down there. I do what's asked of me"
Interpersonal competencies

The third area that was identified by the participants was their ability to maintain interpersonal interactions. Only one client identified getting along with management but many of them highlighted their ability to interact positively with both management and co-workers as another factor in why they were successful in the workplace.

"Because I get along well with the people at work and joke around and I get along well with them and they get along well with me"
"Yes I enjoy it and I like the work and also I like the people"

Maintaining employment - how do they do it?

The participants seemed to identify all of these factors i.e. personal capital, conventional vocational social competencies and interpersonal skills as being important in maintaining their employment. One client commented also on the need to be seen as more hard-working than other workers.

"Well I just keep doing things"
"Become of value to them"
"... always doing something and not bludging as much as what others do"
"...in keeping a full-time job I can control myself and be able to listen to what the boss has to say and do those things straight away and not to be angry or anything about that"

WORK ETHIC

A second, but related theme, was the very strong work ethic of the participants. All of the participants came from very supportive home environments where one or both parents have been in stable employment. Most of them have older siblings who have been employed for several years. Perhaps as a result of these background experiences, they were able to clearly identify the importance of having a job and the personal benefits to them.

According to the clients, the benefits of having a job were both extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic benefits included financial independence and gaining work experience. For half of the clients, being able to earn money as a result of employment was linked closely with their goal of getting a driver's licence and buying a car. Other more intrinsic benefits were being occupied to prevent boredom, feelings of usefulness and confidence (self-concept), gaining life
experience, adult independence and opportunities to learn skills especially in communication.

Half of the clients stated that they like their jobs because of the interpersonal relationships which they formed in the work setting. Two clients expressed interest in being promoted and three others desired longer working hours. The reasons which clients gave for liking their jobs were either task-related e.g. working with computers, or non-task-related e.g. good atmosphere and meeting friendly people.

"Well getting a wage, but other than that getting more work experience and learning different things and just to get out and meet different people and use communication skills and things like that"

Independence - financial and personal

"I am more independent"
"Do my own thing. It's more the car that does that"

Self-concept

"And being that I'm a nervy type of person, I got out of that habit of being nervy too with working. Like once I got used to the people and that I was more relaxed"
"I feel more useful I guess and I can do things"
"I feel better working than not working"
"A lot more confident I must admit, a lot more"

Life experience

"Getting out in the big wide world and working ... to see what it's really like"

"It is experience in everything"

Skills

"Yes learnt a lot - how to look after myself and to do things"

Preventing boredom

"It's better than doing nothing"
"It's having something to do so that you don't get bored"
"It gets me out of the house"
"I was doing a variety of things which was keeping me busy which is good"

Enjoyment
"I even look forward to it"
"I do it for the love of it ..."
"Because it's fun"

WORK-RELATED PROBLEMS

A third theme that emerged related to the area of social competence and interpersonal skills was the problems that participants identified as hindering them in the past from gaining and maintaining work.

Six clients discussed employment experiences where they had lost a job or experienced difficulties in coping with the demands of a job. Several clients experienced difficulty finding full-time employment. They could only secure part-time employment. This situation was not seen as satisfactory as the clients were experiencing significant under-employment. However, they were reluctant to leave these positions because they were unsure of finding alternative employment. Two clients could not obtain any paid employment and were forced to continue voluntary work and TAFE courses for a long time.

Interpersonal difficulties

Interpersonal difficulties that participants had experienced in the past were related to feelings of inadequacy in their qualifications and their inability to handle rejection. They were also aware that they had had difficulties in learning and concentrating in the past and they often felt pressured by the time constraints placed on them. This pressure led them to exhibit asocial behaviours that resulted in job losses or to them leaving a job.

Other reasons given for losing or leaving a job were related to employer attitudes, mismatch between the employee and the demands of the job and a clear case of discrimination based on a medical condition.

Qualifications and Learning Difficulties

"Like one of them is to do with concentration span"
"Just being slow. That's what I have, a lot of difficulty at understanding and learning"
"Sometimes I might need people to tell me two or three times the question ..."
"I just take a bit longer to learn new things"
"I am not good at maths"

Rejection
"When I write a letter, and I get it back and I just, I get angry and annoyed, like I say I might have done something wrong in the resume or in the letter and things like that"

"I wasn't really confident. I wasn't very good with ringing up about jobs and as I got so many knockbacks before I didn't know what to expect half the time. The same with every time I got a letter back after a while it just got too much with sorry you haven't been accepted and all the rest of it"

Time Constraints

"I can work by myself at my own speed, there is nothing wrong with that but when it comes to other people telling me to hurry up, I don't like it"
"...I was upset every night because it was getting on my nerves and that I was sick of being told I was too slow ..."
"I was trying to go as fast as I could without ruining it, like ruining anything and they just kept saying faster, faster"
"I don't cope well with constant pressure"
"They just keep me on this one day because I am not quick enough at doing the work"
"They pushed for more work in shorter time which I never got to"

Asocial behaviour

"It is my behaviour. Because of my, it is called attention deficit, it is in my slowness and with people not letting me try and do my own thing or not trying to let me take my time with things I get angry and frustrated with them and I tend to blow my fuse at them so I just need more help."

"I have stuffed up a lot of jobs lately but I know how to handle it and I know exactly what to do"

Underemployment

"I would love to have a full-time position available but nothing came of it"
"I'm lucky to have this job, one day a week"

CONCLUSIONS

Although this study is still in its preliminary stages, there are important implications for vocational training programs, agencies and vocational educators.

Obviously, if young adults with intellectual disabilities are to be successful in the work force, they need to have the conventional vocationally related social competencies that are often the focus of training programs i.e. punctuality, reliability, staying task committed
etc). Secondly, interpersonal skills, particularly with co-workers were strongly identified as having a major impact on the ability to maintain a job. However, clients also needed to have a sense of personal capital. They need to be aware that they have something to offer to an employer that is of genuine value. They may need to be alerted to certain goals and ambitions that can be achieved through maintaining employment.

These more interpersonal variables are not always included in training programs. Job supervisors and employers need to be aware of the importance they hold for young people with intellectual disabilities.

The participants in this study were using their employment for both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons. Like all young adults these clients were eager to improve their skills and they appreciated a variety of tasks and being kept fully occupied. They particularly did not want to be bored by being kept in the same position for years with no prospect of change or advancement.

Employers should realise that, like all employees, young adults with intellectual disabilities need to develop both vocationally and personally in the workplace. They do not want to remain static. This means that they should be involved in training schemes and offered new opportunities and challenges on a regular basis.

It is a concern that the majority of clients described themselves as "slow" at work-related tasks. This message about their work performance appeared to be derived from both their school and work histories. Whether these workers are in fact poor in work production has yet to be determined. The issue is that they believe themselves to be "slower" than their co-workers. It is recommended that employers and trainers provide positive feedback about the client's work quantity so that they don't perceive themselves as slow. It seems from the analysis of the interviews that past experiences, particularly related to schooling, could have an adverse effect on the clients' perception of their productivity. These negative perceptions could have a profound influence on their willingness to persevere or to try to improve their skills in this area.

Competitive employment is a realistic goal for young adults with mild intellectual disabilities, however, employers and educators have to be aware of the continuing difficulties faced by clients who could be described as vocationally successful. The qualitative research methods used in this study have allowed the clients to delineate from their own perspective, the reasons for their success and the ongoing problems they face in the competitive workforce. These statements could help all of the people who are committed to competitive employment for young adults with mild
intellectual disabilities develop policies, programs and practices that will ensure even greater success.

REFERENCES


Gow, L., Calvez, M., Fitzgerald, M., Reddacliffe, C., Dixon, R.M. and


Table 1: Description of Subjects, Their Living and Employment Situation at the Time of Interview