Florida Provider Network

Benefit Information Key to Job Success

Florida Benefits Information Resource Network (F-BIRN)

As part of Florida's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant (MIG), the the Florida Benefits Information Resource Network (F-BIRN) has been formed. The purpose of MIG grants is to enhance employment options for people with disabilities by building Medicaid infrastructure within a state. Its purpose is to increase the availability of Personal Assistance Services, plan a demonstration to maintain the Independence and Employment Program, or for state-to-state technical assistance.

Also, states may use funding to develop a comprehensive approach to bridge Medicaid services with other key supports and programs used by employed people with disabilities. One key initiative in Florida is to collaborate with agencies and organizations in an attempt to pass **Medicaid Buy-in** (referred to as Work Incentive Medicaid Coverage), which will make health insurance available for purchase for workers with disabilities.

Gain Marketable Skills and a Scholarship

Florida Americorps:
Opportunities for People with Disabilities

People with disabilities have the opportunity to serve in Americorps in Florida and gain marketable skills that will be valuable in their careers. AmeriCorps is a national service program that provides opportunities for citizens age 17 and older to serve their communities. Participants in AmeriCorps, known as "members," join a local program and provide intensive community service. The program engages 75,000 Americans each year and provides opportunities to make a difference in people's communities.

The Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service (Volunteer Florida) is recruiting persons with disabilities into Florida's AmeriCorps programs. AmeriCorps members provide full or halftime service and receive a living allowance and an educational award in exchange for a year commitment to the program of their choice.

During a year of full-time service (1700 hours), an Americorps member will receive a living allowance of $11,000. Once the year of service is complete, the member is provided a scholarship of $4,725 that can be used for college or vocational training. The scholarship can also be used to repay qualifying student loans. Members also receive health insurance and are eligible for child care, based on income.

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Editor: Dale DiLeo

Florida Center for Inclusive Communities

Florida Provider Network Update...

Half-time service (900 hours) provides a living allowance of $6,035, and a scholarship of $2,362.50. Half-time members do not receive health insurance or childcare services.

In September of 2008, legislation was passed that now allows persons who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) to keep all of their SSI benefits and earn an AmeriCorps Living Allowance.

Joining Americorps offers people with disabilities an opportunity to gain new skills. As an AmeriCorps member, the person will join a group of people with many different backgrounds and life experiences,. The individual will learn collaboration, communication, leadership and other life skills.

AmeriCorps members must be at least 17 years of age, must be a U.S. citizen, must have a high school diploma (or be willing to work toward one), and be able to commit to at least one year of service. If accepted, the person must provide a birth certificate or other information documenting age and citizenship. AmeriCorps Members serving vulnerable populations such as youth or seniors must be able to pass local, state, and national background checks.

To join AmeriCorps, the person must apply directly to his or her program of interest. AmeriCorps members serve in full-time, half-time, and even reduced half-time capacity. The kind of slot available will vary from program to program.

To view the current AmeriCorps programs in Florida: http://www.volunteerflorida.org/americorps/programsbycounty.html

For more information: Volunteer Florida, 401 S. Monroe St., Tallahassee, FL 32301, fax: 850-921-5146. http://www.volunteerflorida.org/americorps.html

MIG and F-BIRN

F-BIRN is composed of a diverse group of federal, state and local employees who have completed intensive training through the National Disability Institute. Benefit professionals include:

- Work Incentives Planning Assistance- WIPAs (Subcontractors with SSA)
- Work Incentives Liaisons (Located in SSA field offices)
- Plan for Achieving Self -Support (PASS) Cadre, (Located in Birmingham, AL)
  - Area Work Incentives Coordinators-AWICs (Located in Tampa and Brevard)
  - Protection and Advocacy of Beneficiaries of Social Security (Housed in the Advocacy Center offices throughout FL)

For a listing of current members, go to

http://apd.myflorida.com/employment/fbirn.htm

Above: A Disability Benefits and Work Fact Sheet from theF-BIRN. It can be downloaded at:

http://apd.myflorida.com/employment/docs/disabilty-benefits-and-work.pdf

Help Workers with Disabilites "Fit In" by Observing Workplace Culture

by David Hagner and Dale DiLeo

As SE has evolved, there has been a greater understanding for the need to focus attention on the social aspects of the workplace. Helping a supported employee to become a social part of the workplace means SE professionals must become consultants and facilitators to sponsor social inclusion.

One of the most important tools of facilitating social inclusion is to learn about the social culture of the workplace. A culture is simply the set of norms, rules, expectations that co-workers hold while at work. These guide their behavior, including both work and non-work related actions.

Collecting information about the culture can begin even before initial contacts to a company, by investigating a company's image and reputation in the community. If a personal contact job development strategy is used, the contact person can be a rich source of information about the culture.

Additional information can be collected from written material produced by the company, including memos to staff, annual reports, brochures, notices on bulletin boards, and other documents.

By far the richest source of information will be obtained through observation and informal interviews by employment consultants as they spend time on site at a company.

The Need for Unobtrusive Information-Gathering

It is easy to feel out of place or in the way when observing or asking questions at a work setting. Being uninvolved with company production may be considered "just standing around" and frowned upon. People don't need someone checking them out—they have work to do.

The wrong kind of agency presence can send the wrong message to the workplace about the supported employee and hinder his or her acceptance. Still, there may be a need for an on-site agency presence at a company for the following reasons:

- understanding the culture on behalf of the employee
- verifying that training and performance are occurring
- consulting with coworkers or a supervisor
- helping with training or talk with the employee
- meeting funding or administrative requirements
- acting as a resource for problem solving

Interviewing Members of a Work Culture

The members of a culture are the experts on the culture. Most people, though are unaware of what they know.

A question like "what are the important customs here?" is probably too big. You are likely to get a blank stare.

Ask specific questions as you begin to see what goes on. For example:

"Do people do this every week?" or "How did you know it was your turn?"

Most people enjoy talking about their work, the job setting, and their co-workers. Casual conversations are a relatively non-intrusive means of gathering information. Invite a worker for coffee, or sit down with an employee during a break, and explore "what it's like to work here."

Ask questions as you see and hear things. For example, "Was Fred being serious or was he joking?" You may have to become a familiar face before people will trust you.

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Observing Workplace Culture

If people ask you why you want to know, be perfectly honest: "I'm here to help Sally be able to fit in with everyone."

Interview a number of different people in this way, making sure to include representatives of any different roles or work groups that impact the individual's employment.

Try to determine as quickly as you can who has a good reputation. You wouldn't want to rely on someone who does not fit in well or is about to lose their job.

Sample Questions to Ask

In your conversations, some things to ask about might be:

- **Acceptability**

  "Do most of the workers usually sit here?"

- **Interpretation**

  "When Tom said that was he joking?"

- **Personal Information**

  "Do you ever bring in pictures of your vacation to show around?"

- **Language**

  "What do you mean by the 'bar towels'?"

- **Cliques**

  "Do the doctors ever have lunch with the technicians?"

- **Style of Supervision**

  "How often do these get checked?"

  There may be a rule not to discuss some customs because they may not be officially allowed. Part of learning about the culture is "learning how to learn" about these customs.

Recording and Analyzing Information

Information about things such as cultural norms are subjective. An observer risks hearing only one version of a story or distorting what is observed with personal biases and experiences. This can slant the understanding of the culture.

A few simple strategies will help avoid major errors in interpreting the culture.

- Keep a small notebook handy and jot down later what you see and hear.
- Write down your interpretations, guesses, and "editorial comments" on what you see, but keep these separate from the descriptions of what is actually done or said.

- Pay attention to how you are perceived. For example, being seen as a tool of management or as a scientist studying some unusual phenomenon may harm your efforts to connect people to a work culture.
- Read your notes and look for themes that emerge. See if what people say is borne out by what you see them do, and vice versa. Test out ideas.
- If there is more than one support person who visits the site, discuss the culture together after a few days.
- Test ideas about the culture by asking members to confirm your impressions.

Approaches to Learn about a Culture

Strategies for being available on-site while not interfering with the culture are possible. Good judgement and sensitivity must always be used when approaching a culture from the outside to help someone become part of the inside.

Stay Inconspicuous

Take advantage of the fact that a constant presence recedes into the background of people's awareness. There may be natural locations in a setting where observations can be made and where it is more-or-less acceptable to be around. Some settings have a designated breakroom; restaurants may have a table or booth where you can sit and drink coffee.

Provide Consultation

Becoming a consultant can allow opportunities for observation of the work and social interactions of a supported employee in a different capacity. For example, developing job descriptions for a department provides a rationale or repeated on-site observations and discussions.

Provide Tangential Assistance

Many work sites have no location for observation convenient to the supported employee's work station. And from any one location, only a fraction of a work setting can be observed. Careful observation will almost always uncover a set of tasks that are useful but not critical and are not perceived as helping complete the supported employee's work. Making things neater or cleaner or help with any form of material handling (stocking shelves, unloading or restacking boxes), for example, is appreciated almost anywhere.

David Hagner and Dale DiLeo are the authors of Working Together: Workplace Culture and Supported Employment, a book on using natural supports to assist workers with disabilities in employment.