
Recruiting and Retaining Employment Support Professionals

An organization's ability to expand Individual Competitive Integrated Employment (ICIE) outcomes (ICIE) for the people with disabilities it serves is largely depends on hiring the right Employment Support Professionals (i.e. job developers and job coaches). Employment Support Professionals (ESPs) are not traditional Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). They become the face of the organization in the business community and require a higher-level skill set to interact with employers, identify and match people's unique skills and contributions to employer needs, effectively teach soft skills and job tasks, and facilitate natural supports both at work and outside of work. Finding and investing in the right people for the ESP roles is critical for building agency capacity to efficiently deliver high quality services to facilitate ICIE. Attracting and hiring the right people is the first step. Then, investing in their success with advanced training and effective supervision must follow to ensure high performance and long-term retention.

Intentional ESP Recruitment and Selection Strategies

A difficult but necessary question for service providers is whether they are hiring the right people to deliver high-quality individual supported employment (ISE) services. To borrow an analogy from Mac Anderson, author of [You Can't Send a Duck to Eagle School](#), *If your business is climbing trees, would you rather hire a squirrel or train a horse?* The success of your organization, and the people you support, depends on hiring people whose strengths align with the demands of the ESP role. Too often, service providers hire for "disability fit" and assume they can train their hires on the business and teaching skills needed for effective job development and job coaching. When in actuality, it makes more sense to do the reverse: hire people with strong business and/or teaching skills and then train them in person-centered practices and supported employment services.

Differentiating ESPs from traditional DSPs also allows an agency to pay differently for ESPs. This is essential to attract the kind of people who can do the ESP work efficiently and effectively. Paying differently means both paying *higher* wages than offered for a traditional DSPs role **and** considering

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using performance bonuses. Keep in mind with performance bonuses that quality, not just quantity, is extremely important and there should be higher performance bonuses for successfully working with individuals who face more challenges to getting and keeping ICIE. While paying for individualized services (as opposed to group services) can sometimes mean reimbursement rates do not cover the full cost of individualized staffing, *negotiations with funders on reimbursement rates should acknowledge* that 1:1 rates for ISE services are typically paid at higher rates than other services that have a reimbursement rate for a 1:1 ratio. The higher reimbursement rates should lead to higher compensation for ESPs. Additionally, it is important not to overload your ICIE/ISE program (in budgetary terms, your ICIE/ISE cost center) with program and administrative overhead, which can take away from the funding available for ESP compensation. As far as possible, if an agency can avoid taking administrative overhead out of the reimbursement for ESP services, since ESP staff teams are typically not large in comparison to other programs and services, this will further enable the agency to offer competitive wages and benefits. This allows the agency to attract more candidates, resulting in the agency being more selective in making hiring decisions. No amount of training can substitute for the professional presentation, personality traits, and communication skills that the right candidates bring to the job. Finally, if your agency is paid for ISE services based on outcomes or completed milestones, consider carefully how to ensure those you hire can, within a reasonable period of time for onboarding, achieve the level of quality and efficiency necessary to earn the agency the funding to at least cover the cost of their position. In prioritizing this, it may become even more clear that attracting the right candidates is more critical than post-hire training and credentialing. In other words, you need to hire eagles if you want to send your ESPs to eagle school.

Grow ESP Team Strategically

If providers anticipate only serving a small portion of people with disabilities in ISE, they may expect ESPs to fulfill both the job developer and job coach roles. This is particularly true if it is expected that anyone working in ICIE will not need any job coaching after a short period of time. While this staffing model may have worked up to this point, any agency committed to expanding the number of people working in ICIE will need to staff for varied support needs, including those who will need some amount of job coaching for a longer period of time. When these individuals are served, an agency will typically want their talented job developers to get back to job development rather than end up coaching people for longer periods of time. Thus it becomes important for the agency to have a team of ESPs that are dedicated job coaches, along with an ESPs that are dedicated job developers. While these job developers may in some cases do initial job coaching, if the need for job coaching continues, they will want to be able to call upon an ESP that is a

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dedicated job coach to take over for the longer term. The role of job developer and job coach are different, so recruitment for people who are a good fit with each of the roles will be important.

Ultimately, for both job coaches and job developers, service quality is closely tied to the skills and attributes of who is doing the work, not just how they are trained after they are hired. Mac Anderson's book title "You Can't Send a Duck to Eagle School" says so much about the importance of who is hired and seeking the "eagles" before investing significant funds in training and professional development. Here are some critically important strategies to consider:

- **Recruit Specifically for Employment Support Professionals:** Job descriptions and job postings for job developers and job coaches should reflect the expectations of the job and be based on clear competency frameworks. For job coaches, consider Domains 4 and 5 of the [APSE Universal Employment Competencies](#).
For job developers, consider knowledge skills and abilities (KSA's) related to: developing and maintaining effective relationships with employers; understanding employer talent needs; ability to positively represent job seekers of all kinds; experience and skills for negotiating with employers; and knowledge of customer service strategies.
- **Broaden the Talent Pool Being Targeted for Recruitment:** Look beyond traditional human service backgrounds and prioritize transferable knowledge, skills and abilities for networking, relationship-building, professional communication, and problem-solving. Candidates with backgrounds in sales, human resources, recruiting and customer service may be great hires as job developers, including retirees that had a career in these areas. For job coaches, people with experience in education or training are likely to be a good fit. Both roles require people comfortable with being "in the public eye."
- **Post in a Variety of Places:** Do not over rely on one recruiting platform or strategy. Advertise ESP positions in places such as LinkedIn, colleges and chambers of commerce to reach candidates with business, community development, and other related professional backgrounds.
- **Use Customized Interviews and Realistic Job Previews:** Tailor interviews, *and who conducts them*, to the demands of ESP work. Your agency's executive staff and/or development director would be good personnel to join an ISE manager in interviewing for ESPs. As part of the interview, always ask candidates to describe how they would handle employer outreach, co-worker education, and a few scenarios that require problem-solving. For example, pretend your interviewer/team is an employer and have each candidate choose and ask five questions to

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assess the employer’s workforce needs. This will help distinguish candidates with good “think on their feet” skills, professional communication skills and employer-focused skills. Use realistic job previews through video or in-person “shadowing” experience to convey position expectations and improve job fit and retention. However, keep in mind that shadowing should be done with a top-notch job developer to avoid a candidate shadowing and seeing something that does not represent best practice in how the agency expects the job to be done.

- **Base Selection on the Qualities that Matter Most:** Prioritize candidates who: are curious and community-oriented; believe people with disabilities can work and everyone has something to contribute; demonstrate they operate in a way that is respectful, not charitable. When it comes to employment services, transferable skills, values and mindset can matter much more than previous human service experience.
- **Build a Diverse ESP Team:** A team made up of staff from different cultural backgrounds, age groups, and work histories will likely have stronger combined relationship networks and will offer your agency more ability to match staff with a variety of employers and job seekers of different backgrounds.

Investing in ESPs for Quality and Retention

Organizations that want to improve individual supported employment (ISE) service quality and retain ESPs should view the investment in staff as a core business strategy. This may mean taking a closer look at how employment service funding is used and as mentioned above, reducing administrative and program overhead taken from employment service rates to make investments in higher compensation and specialized training for ESPs. In addition, a high-quality onboarding process and strong professional development framework are important, including:

- **Use structured onboarding and professional development plans:** Give each new ESP a clear development plan and timeline after hire to set expectations and introduce best practices early, rather than relying on informal shadowing and learning. Early turnover decreases when new staff feel competent and supported. Informal shadowing may inadvertently reinforce the opposite of what you want ESPs to learn.
- **Use competency frameworks for individualized professional development plans:** Competency frameworks help supervisors identify the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) job developers and job coaches bring to the job and which areas are still areas for

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development. Refer to the APSE Universal Employment Competencies and Customized Employment Competency Model in the resources section below as tools that can be used to evaluate competency of ESPs. Tailor professional development to each staff person's competency needs, professional growth goals and learning style. Include a focus on resiliency and emotional well-being for all ESPs.

- **Dedicate a budget for advanced professional development, certifications, and specializations:** Compared to Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), ESPs need different knowledge and skills, which may require a greater financial investment in initial and ongoing training because the agency cannot provide what is needed in-house. Research options for advanced credentials and specialized training, talk to others who have taken these options and consider general evidence-based strategies that are likely worth investing in, such as: Discovery, Customized Job Negotiation, Motivational Interviewing and Work Incentives education for job developers; for job coaches, the Seven-Phase Sequence, Systematic Instruction, Enabling Technology for Work, Building and Leveraging Natural Supports and Strategies for Fading.

- **Build mentoring and group supervision into practice:** Use mentoring and group supervision (virtual if easier) to connect what is learned in training to day-to-day work. These strategies improve retention and support leadership development. Refer to the resources for group supervision and mentoring below.

- **Use informal training and coaching strategies:** Developing staff trainers, hosting outside speakers/information sessions, providing shared reading assignments, and watching/discussing high-impact videos from sources such as [Open Future Learning](#) are low-cost strategies that create a culture of continuous learning and strengthen teamwork.

- **Create career ladders:** Define clear pathways for advancement within the organization and within the employment services team. Some examples are: Skill Building DSP to Job Coach; Workplace Assistant to Job Coach; Job Coach to Job Developer, Job Coach to Lead Job Coach to Job Coach Supervisor. Job Developer to Customized Employment Specialist; Job Developer to Entrepreneurial Support Specialist; Job Developer to Job Development Supervisor. Career ladders increase motivation and improve retention.

- **Crosstrain staff across services:** Train Skill Building and Community Living Supports staff on effective teaching strategies, including systematic instruction. This not only expands the

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agency's capacity to offer job coaching but will raise staff competencies to ensure skill building is occurring in these services, as expected by MDHHS.

Key Resources for Service Providers

- **[APSE Universal Employment Competencies](#)** is a nationally recognized competency framework that outlines the core knowledge and skills employment professionals need to support people with disabilities in supported, customized, and self-employment.
- **[Customized Employment Competency Model](#)** defines the knowledge and practices needed to deliver high-quality customized employment services.
- **[Realistic Job Preview - Employment Specialist in Community Treatment](#)** is an example realistic job preview that helps applicants understand the expectations, duties, and fit of an employment specialist within community treatment settings.
- **[Structured Behavioral Interviews](#)** uses behavior-based interview questions to assess candidates' past performance and job-related competencies. This resources is for general DSPs but the questions can be adapted for ESPs interviews.
- **[Supporting Individuals with Significant Disabilities](#)** explains the purpose, responsibilities, and effective practices of job coaches supporting workers with significant disabilities.
- **[Teachable Fit: A New Approach for Easing the Talent Mismatch](#)** encourages employers to hire for trainable ability and potential, rather than relying only on exact prior experience or credentials.
- **[Staff Recruitment, Retention, & Training Strategies for Community Human Services Organizations](#)** is a workforce development guide from the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration that offers practical strategies for recruiting, supporting, and retaining human service staff.
- **[Promising Recruitment and Retention Strategies](#)** from the Administration on Community Living highlights evidence-informed strategies providers can use to strengthen Direct Support Professional recruitment and retention.
- **[Strengthening the Direct Care Workforce in Rural Areas](#)** from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services highlights strategies for improving recruitment, retention, and support of

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care workers in rural and geographically isolated communities.

- **[Rural Routes: Promising Supported Employment Practices in America’s Frontier](#)** describes practical supported employment strategies tailored to rural and frontier communities where geography and limited services can create unique barriers.
- **[IPS Supported Employment in Rural and Frontier Areas](#)** outlines challenges, advantages, and solutions for implementing IPS in rural areas.
- **[Group Supervision Process Description](#)** is a structured supervision tool that lays out the step-by-step process for focused, strengths-based group case review and problem-solving.
- **[The Peer Empowerment Program Toolkit](#)** is a complete toolkit for planning and implementing mentoring programs within community-based human service organizations, which can be adapted for employment services.
- **[Fostering Commitment and Skill Through Mentoring Programs](#)** by the University of Minnesota Institute on Community Integration provides information about how mentoring programs can strengthen staff skill development and retention in community human services organizations.
- **[Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators \(ACRE\)](#)** is a national organization that promotes quality employment services through educator standards, training, and certificates.
- **[APSE Certified Employment Support Professional \(CESP\)](#)** is a national professional certification from APSE that verifies an employment support professional has demonstrated competency in providing integrated employment services.
- **[Incompass Michigan](#)** offers an ACRE Employment Services Certificate Course, to build a foundation of knowledge and skills, including those used in customized employment, to assist people with disabilities to achieve and maintain competitive employment: <https://incompassmi.org/series/acre-certification/>
- **[Open Future Learning](#)** is an online learning platform focused on training the developmental disability workforce through practical courses led by recognized experts in the field.
- **[ThinkWork!](#)** And the **[Institute for Community Inclusion](#)** - ThinkWork! is the Institute for Community Inclusion’s resource hub offering data, stories, tools, and research to improve employment and community life outcomes for people with IDD.
- **[Marc Gold and Associates](#)** is a training and consultation organization specializing in

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customized employment, Discovery, the Seven-Phase Sequence and systematic instruction practices.

- [Griffin-Hammis Associates](#) is a training and consultation organization specializing in customized employment and self-employment.
- [TransCen Online](#) is an eLearning platform that translates disability employment research and effective practices into training for providers, educators, families, and others.
- [VCU WorkSupport](#) has research, training, and online courses for supported employment and competitive integrated employment.

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