

How Do We Measure Social Success?

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To believe social achievement lies in perfection, and then to go on and say we have failed if we do not achieve perfection, is to fail before we start.

We began with a mission to provide career opportunities for every individual who had a disability and chose to work. What began as a wonderful and just objective became convoluted and entangled with other goals and social objectives such as integration, economic independence, social unacceptability of some careers, and economic justice.

The imposition of these additional goals and social objectives has constricted our options. Supported employment is now believed by some to be the only option available to achieve this social restructuring in conjunction with the legal mandates of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). With these major system changes in place, it is now time to assess our progress on the original goal: career opportunities for all individuals who have a disability and choose to work.

The effectiveness of employment strategies, programs, laws, rules and regulations is measured by their impact on a target population. If the strategy, program, law, rule or regulation is effective, the target population should expect a positive change to occur. The expected changes should be a decrease in the unemployment rate of the target population or an increase less than or equal to the rate for the general population. This would be true in all cases unless the target population grew disproportionately to the general population.

Currently agencies on a state, federal and local level that are responsible for programs to improve the employment rate for individuals with a disability are allocating their entire resource base to a single strategy or option (supported employment) and ADA. The option these responsible parties have chosen to support to the exclusion of other models by defunding or drastically reducing funding is supported employment.

Supporting one strategy to the exclusion of all other options should require that these sponsoring units of government know what is wanted, needed, and meets the test of performance by best serving individuals with a disability. It is now time for representatives of enterprises providing employment options and persons with disabilities to evaluate the outcome of this support for a single option.

There is a way to objectively evaluate the success of supported employment as a single option by directly measuring the model's success using data generated by the U.S. Census Bureau. The 1980 Census reported an unemployment rate of 51% for persons 16 to 65 who have a disability, and a 1990 rate of 57% for persons 18 to 65 who have a disability and the Harris Poll of 1994 shows the rate to be 64% or an increase of 13%. This same Census reports a rate of 6.5% for the general population in 1980 and 6.3% for 1990 for the general population. This clearly demonstrates an employment strategy flawed and not capable of addressing today's problems related to unemployment of individuals with a disability.

Before completing this assessment of the supported employment option, we should review any change in the target population that is significantly different than the general population. During this 1980-1990 Census reporting period, the general population grew by 9.8% for age groups 16-65 and the population of individuals with a disability increased at a much lower rate of 6.2%. Therefore the rate of increase in

population is not a cause for higher unemployment but should have supported a decrease in unemployment of persons with a disability. We should therefore be concerned from just a performance base that supported employment as a single option will not deliver the desired result by individuals with a disability who seek an opportunity for a career.

During the period 1980-1990 other options for producing employment opportunities for people who are disabled were reduced or eliminated. This reduction or elimination took place when government agencies responsible for the funding of these options totally defunded or drastically reduced funding for all but supported employment. Even though we are now spending 100% more funds in the 90 s than we did in the 80 s, jobs for the disabled have been lost. The 1980 total expenditure was \$933,000,000 and the 1990 total was \$1,789,000,000. Even after adjusting for inflation and population growth, we did not invest wisely.

The evaluation of the two remaining assessment elements is more difficult because they are far less objective. In the case of what is needed, it is not simply a matter of what we the social planners and service providers determine is needed. If the process were that easy we could then as a society dictate that all unemployed disadvantaged individuals must go to school or forfeit any assistance in obtaining a job. This dictate would follow an analysis that a lack of training and education is the major cause for a high unemployment rate for disadvantaged citizens. Because the major determining cause was a lack of education, we are now able to impose our solution.

As a society we could not do this and escape a legal challenge by the disadvantaged, yet we are able to do this time and again with legal immunity in the case of the severely disabled through mandated single option of supported work. In our history we have precedence for single option service based on what we know to be needed. Not that long ago, families of disabled individuals had to choose between institutionalization and no service. The social planners knew that it was for their good and the good of society to place in institutions.

The last element, what the individual wants, has often been totally discounted in decisions effecting individuals who have a disability. Our belief that they are incapable of making a decision that would be in their best interest has allowed us to design single option systems for their protection. Single option systems will always lead to abuse because the denial of choice is to deprive us of freedom. It is not the intent of this discussion to discredit supported employment as a viable needed option, but rather to point out the error we are making when requiring the elimination of other options for providing valued careers for individuals with a disability.

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