

Working on purpose: 6 steps to employment and a framework for planning

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Abstract. Working on Purpose: 6 Steps to Employment and a Framework for Planning is a unique blend of integrated employment and person-centered planning theories packaged in one practical resource. It provides a value-based step-by-step process for supporting individuals with disabilities explore, discover and experience meaningful community inclusion and productive civic engagement and contribution.

This paper is a synthesis of material that was presented at the 2013 National APSE conference in Indianapolis, Indiana in June. In addition to learning the content that is represented here conference participants received a hard copy version of the Working on Purpose workbook and planning templates.

Keywords: Employment, person-centered planning, civic engagement, disability, community inclusion

Working on Purpose was developed around 2005 as a practical resource for use in state-operated psychiatric hospitals across New York State. It was designed for practitioners who suddenly found themselves faced with the task of providing community-based employment services.

At the time, supported employment, person-centered planning, and other exemplary approaches common in the developmental disability sector were either novel to this particular environment or dismissed as being exclusively relevant to people with intellectual disabilities. The priority and emphasis during this time was to “get the employment numbers up” with far less attention paid to the established core values and quality indicators for best practice. Working on Purpose proved to be an effective way to support rapid employment development without compromising the integrity of best practice in supported employment and person-centered planning.

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1. Underlying values and assumptions in working on purpose

Historically, people with disabilities have been separated from the main stream of community-life and excused from the expectation of making contributions to society. A core premise for Working on Purpose is that people with disabilities have important and active contributions to make to our common life, and that communities are missing something vital when they are not present (O’Brien and Blessing, 2011).

All people are born with gifts, capacity, purpose, and the right for access to equal opportunity through which to share and contribute them for the benefit of society. This is a key aspect of how we understand our roles as citizens.

We live in a society that places a lot of value on employment status. Work gives us much of our identity and sense of belonging. People with significant disabilities need access to meaningful options for competitive employment in regular community settings like everyone else.

Working on Purpose is designed to do two things: first to engage people with disabilities in an intentional person-centered process of exploration and discovery of potential and purpose, and secondly, to activate this potential in positive and productive ways in employment settings with ordinary or customized jobs, in civic settings where people gather formally and informally, and in social networks.

2. Introduction to the 6 steps to employment and a framework for planning

6 Steps to Employment emerged in response to the confusion and the frustration practitioners experienced in finding jobs for people with significant barriers to employment during times of economic crisis in the United States. In addition to having received little formal training in supported employment technology, using typically logical approaches to accessing the job market was of little use as people all over the country were looking for work. Time and again over-qualified job seekers would absorb many of the positions that job developers were canvassing for people with significant barriers to employment. In many respects this phenomenon was good because it challenged employment specialists to find alternative approaches to introducing people with disabilities to the world of work and to other equally important roles within integrated community settings. 6 Steps to Employment and a Framework for Planning turned out to be one such alternative to assisting people to obtain supported and self-employment, and to engage in volunteer and other civically-minded activities.

For many job developers and job seekers, the idea of finding a job with or on behalf of someone with significant disabilities is an overwhelming task. Negative public perception and stereotyping may seem like an insurmountable wall to get over, and may very well serve to justify why keeping people with significant disability in segregated environments is the best alternative. This is unacceptable as it perpetuates the myths that swirl around disability and denies communities the opportunity to experience the richness of diversity.

In a powerful essay called *The Relational Basis of Empowerment* (2013, p. 13) authors Karl Nunokoosing and Mark Haydon-Laurelut challenge readers to replace the negative stories that are told about people with disabilities (the community is not ready to accept them, they need to be protected, etc.) with stories of connection to community through mutually beneficial,

reciprocal relationships. Changing the story requires changing the way people with disabilities are known and understood, not only by people in the general public but by people in the disability service delivery system as well. This is where 6 Steps to Employment and a Framework for Planning comes in.

When implemented as it is described here, 6 Steps to Employment helps practitioners gain new perspective and insight into the person they are supporting and shift the relationship from one of power over the person to one that is empowering to the person. The six steps are:

1. Develop a *positive profile* of the person
2. Define the *purpose* for seeking employment
3. Explore the *field of opportunity* based on the information learned during steps 1 and 2
4. Identify and select the best approach to *supporting employment*
5. Identify personal and professional *networks*
6. Develop a plan and *take action*

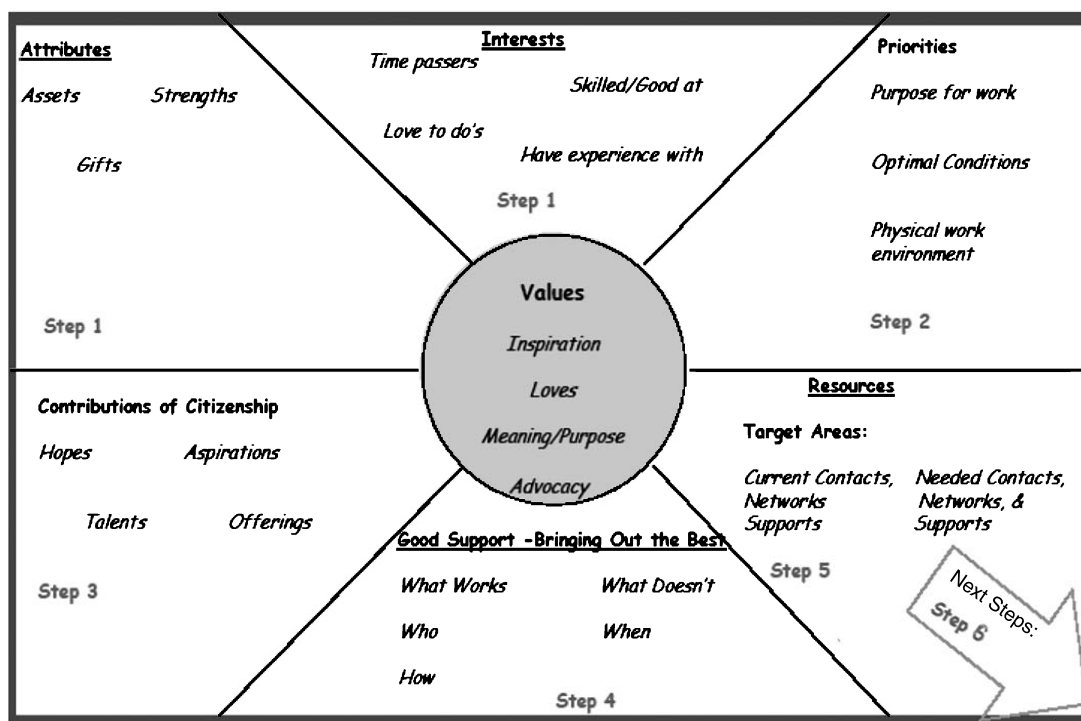
2.1. Step 1: Develop a positive profile

This critical first step is about gathering together a comprehensive and current understanding of the person's vision of employment across a variety of areas including but not limited to aspirations, dreams or goals, values and ideals or higher purpose, interests, talents, skill sets, positive attributes, immediate priorities, learning styles and preferences, support requirements, support resources, environmental preferences, and work site conditions and life/work experience. It is a front-end load that will pay off tremendously.

There are many ways in which this information can be gathered. Denise Bissonnette (1997) published *Cultivating True Livelihood: Work in the 21st Century*. This gem of a resource is a comprehensive compendium of hundreds of activity-based tools and tasks, ranging from self-awareness to negotiating with employers, for job seekers with disabilities. It is a resource that should be called on throughout the full 6 Step experience to gain clarity and keep from getting bogged down moving from one step to the next.

Embedded in the 6 Steps to Employment process is a person-centered approach called A Framework for Planning. This planning tool was developed in 2006 by Carol Blessing and Connie Ferrell, and later modified in 2012 to include a stronger emphasis on civic engagement through citizenship and to create a direct alignment with the 6 Steps to Employment approach. Figure 1 illustrates the modified Framework planning

Purpose: to identify potential valued roles for citizenship contribution through work



6 Steps to Employment and A FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING
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Fig. 1. A Framework for planning template.

template with each of the six steps assigned to specific sections in the template.

A Framework for Planning is a facilitated person-centered approach to gathering and organizing information with and about a person that has a specific focus in mind. For the purposes of the 6 Steps process the focus for planning is to identify potential roles for active civic engagement through work and other valued community roles. This focus, or purpose, sets the context in which the Framework for Planning process is facilitated. Central to the Framework, and directly tied to the focus for the planning, is discovering and understanding the core values, inspiration and calling that gives the person's life meaning.

There are seven additional elements that comprise the Framework for Planning. The top half of the template hosts three areas that contain information relative to the person's positive characteristics, their strengths, gifts, skills, interests and experiences. As stories are told and information is shared about the person, themes emerge and begin to paint a picture of who the person is well beyond the labels of disability. Often it is dur-

ing this portion of the process that core values begin to clarify.

The lower half of the template begins to work with the potential that is synthesized from the emerging profile. By this stage people are able to "see" how the gifts of the person can be offered in productive, positive and meaningful ways through employment and associational life. People are asked to brainstorm all of the ways they can imagine the person's contribution being appreciated and welcomed in typical community settings. After the brainstorm, the person selects the top three or four ideas that are most attractive. Identifying the kind and level of assistance the person needs to move in the direction of a particular idea comes next and is repeated for each of the priority selections as does the identification of existing and necessary resources.

The three areas that comprise this part of the Framework, once completed, really set the stage for taking action. The last step of the Framework for Planning process is the most important because it mobilizes the first step out the door to community.

2.2. Step 2: Develop a purpose

People choose to work for a variety of reasons. One potential mistake of job developers might be to assume that they know why the job seeker is looking for employment. It is quite feasible that a job developer's aspirations are out of synch with what the job seeker presently needs from a job. Securing employment for the purpose of putting food on the table will likely take a different path from launching a career in early childhood development.

A person's view of work runs parallel to his or her view of life. Is the person working "for" something or "toward" something? It is important to know the answer to this question when supporting someone in finding employment. Again Denise Bissonnette provides excellent guidance, this time through her May 2004 Diversity World *True Livelihood* Newsletter in which she suggests that people may be driven to work for any one or a combination of these desires: to get by, to get ahead, to dabble in something or get our feet wet, to try something different or spread our wings, to gain security, to get some balance, to build skill, to build experience, etc.

Understanding the purpose that work holds for the person will make the difference between helping them look for a job as opposed to helping them answer a calling. That's a big difference in how time, energy and other precious resources are spent.

2.3. Step 3: Explore the opportunity field

This step is centered on the idea that there is a place for everyone in community. Finding where one belongs is a matter of understanding what the community has to offer and what productive contributions the individuals can provide to the community. John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993), posit that the primary building block of any community is its residents – the people in it. Each person in a community has gifts, skills and capacities to exchange. The exchange occurs when there is something worth mobilizing toward or around. They call this the gift of citizenship.

By this point in the 6 Steps process, an image or images of potential community contribution has come into focus. The task at this juncture is to begin exploring places in the community where the connection between what the person has to offer and where it will be accepted and welcomed is made. This is not the time to search the classified section of the newspaper but to literally take to the streets.

There are three fundamental parts of any community. There are individuals, or the people that make up the first part; voluntary associations make up a second part; and then there are local institutions that comprise the third part of a community. Beyond these foundations lies the local economy and the actual architecture or physical world within and around the community. Each of these parts contains tremendous resources, or assets. Step three of the 6 Steps process requires people to conduct an asset mapping inventory for a specified geographic radius, perhaps preferably near where the person resides. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) provide a detailed description of asset mapping in their book *Building Communities from the Inside Out*.

Once the community asset map has been completed it is time to identify and explore all the possible ways in which the job seeker's gifts and capacities line up through current and potential valued roles with various people and places found in the mapping process. As in the brainstorming session during the Framework process in Step 1, the individual selects the top 4 – 5 attractive options to start working toward.

2.4. Step 4: Select the best approach for supporting employment

Knowing where and what type of job or social role the person is keen on pursuing is helpful when customizing the best and least intrusive approach to supporting the individual to obtain, learn and sustain employment (Brooke, Inge, Armstrong, & Wehman 1997). This requires the employment specialist to have a broad understanding and knowledge of best practice supported employment model designs; such as the individual support model, the customized supported employment model, competitive placement, and self-employment. It behooves support specialists to be well versed across all of these models so that a hybrid model may be created in response to the unique interests and needs of the job seeker.

Once a model or support design has been selected it must be held up to and clearly meet the federal regulation and standards for best practices in supported employment.

2.5. Step 5: Identify and leverage networks

Everyone has some sort of network web. Some people have several. In this step, the objective is to identify the professional and personal networks in each job seeker's orbit in order to draw from every possible

connection relevant to the place(s) and people near, around and in the targeted community that may lead to an opportunity for active engagement, and ultimately employment. In their book *Working Together* (1995), authors David Hagner and Dale Dileo describe this as a “social tie snowflake” through which everybody knows somebody who knows somebody who will be somehow connected to where the job seeker is trying to go. The 6 Steps training workbook includes a relationship mapping template that is completed by the job seeker and all of the people in his or her network of support.

At this juncture there should be a great deal of clarity around where the person is headed and what needs to happen to begin moving toward that direction. The primary objective for this step is to identify who might be willing and/or able to assist making the move forward as easy and as effective as possible. The benefit to this is that there is enough specificity surrounding the target area that requests for help can be specific, no matter how big or how small. People in general seem to step in to provide assistance if they know a) what exactly is being asked of them and b) that they have the ability to carry out the request. Most anyone is willing to pick up the phone or to send an email as a way to break the initial ice if they, too, can see the alignment and how their role serves a specific purpose.

2.6. Step 6: Take action

The last step of the process is really the first next step that moves the job seeker in the direction of one or more of the identified target areas. The 6 Steps to Employment and A Framework for Planning Next Steps template consolidates all of the critical information into one document that serves to guide the next course of action.

Planners complete the Next Steps template by filling in the first of five areas with the actual name of a specific place in the community that was identified during step 3. The template is next populated with the associated roles the person was most interested in pursuing. Perhaps the most important element is the completion of the third area of the template. This section asks “what has to happen right now?” followed by who can/will help and by when. It takes only the first step to set things in motion. Those who use the processes outlined in this paper to support people with significant disabilities find their rightful place as contributing citizens will

be delighted to find that as a result, they too, are Working on Purpose.

3. Conclusion

This paper provides an introduction to two primary resources that support the engagement of people with disabilities in civic life through employment and other important social roles. The overview of *Working on Purpose: 6 Steps to Employment* outlines six interconnected tasks that support a vision of contribution through active citizenship. The person-centered process A Framework for Planning[©] offers a way to facilitate the gathering and utilization of information for taking action during the 6 Step process. Each of these resources is steeped in several value-based theories that are explained at the beginning of the paper. Job seekers who appreciate and apply 6 Steps to Employment and a Framework for Planning with people who are interested in finding direction and purpose in life will undoubtedly discover new and innovative options for advancing the inclusion experience between people with disabilities and fellow community members.

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