

## **Customized Employment Q and A: Assisting Adults with Intellectual Disabilities and Their Families to Pursue Their Employment Goals**

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Federal and state policies have promoted a shift away from segregated day programs for people with disabilities towards employment in integrated settings. According to recent statistics, however, the majority of adults with intellectual disabilities (ID) continue to attend facility-based programs such as sheltered workshops (Braddock et al., 2005; Metzel et al., in press). This fact sheet explores why adults with disabilities choose to attend sheltered workshops and how this situation can be changed.

### **Question: Who participated in this study?**

**Answer:** These findings are based on responses from 210 adults with ID who attended 19 sheltered workshops in a Midwestern state in 2005; their respective families or caregivers, called "families" in this fact sheet ( $N = 185$ ); and the staff members who worked with these consumer respondents in the workshops ( $N = 224$ ). Researchers chose the 19 sites, which were geographically representative, with help from experts knowledgeable about disability programs in that state. Adult respondents met the following three criteria:

- Intellectual disability was their primary disability.
- They were the workshops' most recent clients (placed after January 1, 2000).
- They did not have jobs outside the workshop.

The 210 adults with ID were almost equally distributed between women (51%) and men (49%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 79 years ( $M = 38.5$ ;  $SD = 13.5$ ). About 95% were diagnosed with ID. Of those people, 60% were labeled as having mild ID, 29% moderate, and 3% severe. None had profound ID. Most of the adults with disabilities were white (90%). The remaining participants were either African-American (9%) or Hispanic (1%).

Women comprised a large majority of family members (81%), with their ages ranging between 22 and 83 ( $M = 51.4$ ,  $SD = 13.6$ ,  $N = 177$ ). Most respondents were parents (43%); 19% were extended family and 38% professionals who had a relationship with the person but were not workshop staff.

Most workshop staff members that were surveyed were female (79%). Their ages ranged from 20 to 71 ( $M = 39$ ;  $SD = 11.4$ ;  $N = 212$ ).

### **Question: How did researchers collect this information?**

**Answer:** Researchers interviewed adults with ID. Staff and family completed written surveys. Questions for all participants focused on the same themes, phrased to suit the respondent's role. For instance, a question in the interview read: "Would you like to work outside a workshop?" The corresponding question to families on the survey read: "Would you like your son/daughter to work outside a workshop?" Finally, the same question to staff read: "Do you think that this participant would like to work outside a workshop?"

**Question: Do these findings apply to other individuals with ID?**

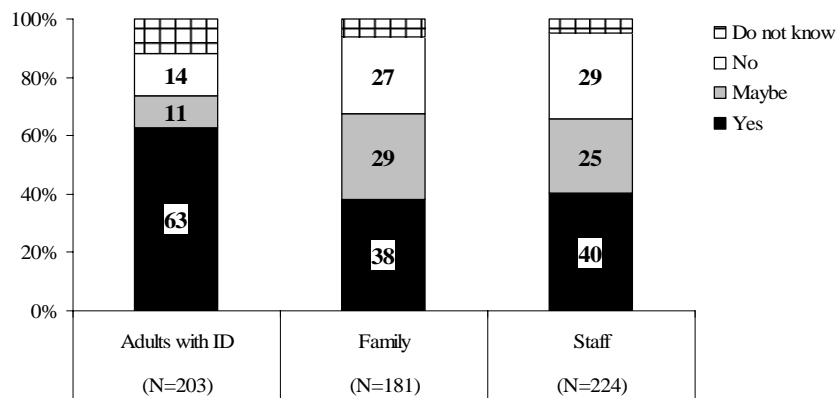
**Answer:** These findings should not be generalized to a population larger than this sample, because participants were not randomly selected for the study. However, this research shows that there are adults with disabilities currently in sheltered workshops who would prefer employment in the general labor market, and whose families and staff support that preference.

**Question: What did people with disabilities, families, and staff say about individuals' employment preferences?**

**Answer: The majority of the individuals with disabilities and their caregivers reported that they would prefer employment outside sheltered workshops.** Only 14% of adults with intellectual disabilities and 27% of their family members stated that they did **not** want employment outside the workshop. Staff confirmed this finding: Twenty-nine percent reported that they believed that adults with ID did not want outside employment.

Sixty-three percent of adults with ID wanted employment outside sheltered workshops, and 11% thought they might like it. The remaining 12% did not know or had never thought about the option. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1: Preferences for Employment Outside Sheltered Workshops**



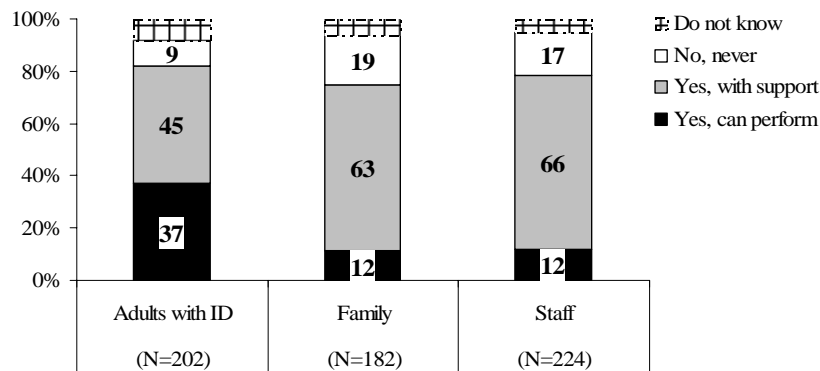
**Question: Did disability severity influence the employment preferences of adults with intellectual disabilities and their families?**

**Answer:** This did not appear to be the case. In fact, the majority of adults with ID interviewed had mild disability (61%) and 29% had moderate ID, with only 3% having severe ID and none having profound ID. Moreover, preferences about types of employment within the group of participants with severe ID and their families were no different from the preferences of the remaining participants.

**Question: Did adults with ID and their families choose workshops because they believed that the adults could not perform community jobs?**

**Answer:** Not necessarily. Only 9% of adults with ID, 19% of family members, and 17% of staff thought that even if support were provided, adults with ID would not be able to perform a community job. (See Figure 2.) To clarify, 37% of adults with ID believed that they could perform outside sheltered workshops and 45% of them thought that they could do this with support. The remaining 9% did not know or had never considered the option.

**Figure 2: Belief in the Ability of Adults with ID to Perform Community Jobs**



**Question: Given that many adults with ID preferred community employment and thought they could succeed, why did they attend sheltered workshops?**

**Answer:** Adults with disabilities and families expressed a number of concerns that influenced the choice of sheltered workshops over community employment. It is noteworthy that most of these mirrored preoccupations that people without disabilities typically have when applying for jobs. Over half of the families considered the following issues important or very important when choosing the type of employment: transportation to and from the workplace (69%), long-term placement (66%), safety (69%), convenience of work hours (59%), retention of disability benefits (57%), work skills requirements (55%), and friendly social environment (55%).

It should be noted that often these concerns were not based on actual personal experiences, since adults with ID had seldom experienced employment outside workshops. In fact, according to the families, 66% of adults with ID in this study had no paid work experience (or respondents did not remember), 20% had only one paid work experience, and only 14% had more than one paid work experience ( $N = 183$ ).

**Question: Did a particular concern emerge as the most important?**

**Answer:** Twenty-nine percent of family members considered stable long-term placement the most important factor, and 23% thought the same of safety issues. The remaining 47% shared little agreement on the most important concern that influenced the choice of employment venue ( $N = 142$ ). For instance, although 57% of families considered disability benefits an **important** or **very important** concern, only 3% considered this concern **the most important**. Similarly, although 69% of the families considered transportation important or very important, only 4% considered it the most important factor.

According to 29% of staff, the social environment in the workplace was the most important issue that influenced the choices of adults with ID. Only 16% and 14% agreed with families that safety and long-term placement, respectively, were the most important concerns. The remaining 41% of staff shared little agreement on this question (N = 167).

**Question: What other factors may explain why adults with disabilities attend sheltered workshops?**

**Answer:** This is a good question! More can be done to encourage adults with ID and their families to pursue community employment. A relatively small percentage of professionals encouraged adults with ID and families to pursue employment outside sheltered workshops. Only 31% of families said that case managers did so; the figures were 29% for vocational rehabilitation counselors and 22% for sheltered workshop staff. A large percentage of families (40%), adults with ID (46%), and staff (60%) said that nobody had encouraged the adult to pursue employment outside the sheltered workshop, or that they did not know if anybody had. In contrast, 43% of families said that case managers encouraged families to choose sheltered workshops, and 28% said the same of vocational rehabilitation counselors.

**Question: In conclusion, what can we do to better assist adults with intellectual disabilities to pursue their employment goals?**

**Answer:** The answer to this question varies by organization type. Sheltered workshop staff could make sure that people with ID and their families know about the possibility of pursuing employment goals outside the workshop. In addition, staff can help individuals and families connect to employment agencies that can assist with community employment goals. Note that some workshops are run by organizations that also operate employment agencies.

Employment agency staff can make sure that individual plans for employment address survey respondents' major concerns such as long-term placement, safety, and the social environment in the workplace.

Finally, case managers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, residential staff, and other professionals who interact with adults with ID can encourage them and their families to pursue community employment. Encouragement is important to make consumers' employment goals come true.

### **Resources**

Braddock, D., Hemp, R., Rizzolo, M. C., Coulter, D., Haffer, L., & Thompson, M. (2005). *The state of the states in developmental disabilities 2005*. Boulder, CO: Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities.

Metzel, D. S., Boeltzig, H., Sulewski, S., Butterworth, J., & Gilmore, D. S. (in press). Achieving community membership through community rehabilitation provider services: Are we there yet? *Mental Retardation*.

Migliore, A. (2006). *Sheltered workshops and individual employment: Perspectives of consumers, families, and staff members*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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