

**University of Massachusetts Boston**

---

**From the Selected Works of John Kramer**

---

Summer June, 2014

# Effective supervision and career advancement of individuals with IDD

John Kramer, *University of Massachusetts Boston*

Jean Winsor, *University of Massachusetts Boston*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/john-kramer/6/>



# Effective supervision and career advancement of individuals with IDD

John Kramer, PhD, Jean Winsor, PhD

Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston

## Introduction

Many studies have found that people with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) want to work in the community. When individuals with IDD share the reasons they want to work, these are

- (a) earnings
- (b) productivity
- (c) the admiration of others
- (d) the quality of social relationships

People with IDD have also expressed the desire to do meaningful work, demonstrate their skills and talents, choose their own careers, and have the same opportunities for career advancement as people without disabilities.

As professionals in the disability field, we are in a unique position to support the career goals of individuals with IDD who want to work as researchers. While the literature contains rich knowledge of how employment service providers can support individuals with IDD and employers, there is limited literature directed towards employers themselves.

This poster highlights our experiences supervising individuals with IDD who are employed in the field of research and who receive both individualized supported integrated employment services and natural supports at the workplace.

## Five Strategies for Effective Supervision of People with IDD

Effective supervision of employees with IDD is not wholly different from effective supervision of people without disabilities. The five strategies we have found most effective are these:

- » 1. Use clear and consistent communication.
- » 2. Be aware of who supports the employee on and off the job.
- » 3. Get to know the individual and let the individual get to know you.
- » 4. Facilitate building a support network of co-workers.
- » 5. Work directly with the employee on a project.

### 1. Use clear and consistent communication.

One strategy that we found useful in our supervision was to "keep it simple" by using clear and consistent communication. This did not mean that we did not discuss complex ideas with the employee; instead, we used language that was easy to understand and clarified with the individual their understanding of what we had said. In fact, using simple language generally is a good approach with all employees.

How to keep it simple:

- » Use short sentences that communicate one main idea.
- » Use concrete, direct instructions: do not "suggest" or "imply."
- » Avoid jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations.
- » Check for understanding. After each piece of information, ask, "What do you think about this?" Ask the employee to reflect back to you their understanding of what needs to happen. By asking this question we often found that we needed to rephrase the information we provided or the task we wanted the individual to complete.
- » Be aware of body language and facial expressions. These can convey whether the messages are being understood.

### 2. Be aware of who supports the employee on and off the job.

#### On the job

Sometimes individuals work with employment specialists to help them obtain and maintain a job. Employment specialists may also be called "job developers" or "job coaches," and they often work for an organization that provides work-related supports. There are many ways you can work with employment specialists. For example, these specialists can help you develop a task checklist, brainstorm with you and the employee about work design, provide information about workplace strategies, offer the individual training in specific tasks, facilitate relationships with co-workers, and assist the individual with maintaining good health, attendance, and hygiene.

#### Off the job

When individuals with IDD encounter problems on the job, it cannot be assumed that the problem is caused by the job itself. We have found that the issues that arise on the job are just as likely to be the result of challenges the individual may be experiencing in their personal life that have a carry-over impact to their place of employment.

### 3. Get to know the individual and let the individual get to know you.

Another strategy for effective supervision is to develop and maintain a rapport with each employee you supervise. This can be especially important to people with disabilities, who can face challenges that can be both structural (e.g., people with IDD often work part-time hours, offering fewer opportunities to interact) and attitudinal (i.e., the perception that people with disabilities are less capable). For these reasons, employees with IDD in particular benefit from positive personal relationships with their supervisors.

During the first days of employment it is vitally important

for you as a supervisor to be cognizant of how we communicated. Being concrete and positive helped to lay the groundwork for a working relationship where mutual respect was the norm.

For example, one of us goes to the same gym as our employee, so this served as a mutual area of interest. We also talk about our families, what we do on holidays, etc. All of these examples helped us to build a good solid relationship with the employee.

#### How to get to know the individual and let the individual get to know you

- » Demonstrate respect by saying hello, goodbye, please, and thank you.
- » Let the employee know about your own interests and hobbies outside of work.
- » Introduce the employee to coworkers, including when new people join the business.
- » Make sure the individual is included in meetings and social gatherings. This may require adapting his/her work schedule from time to time.

### 4. Facilitate building a support network of co-workers.

We all have co-workers who are not our supervisors that we know we can ask for information or assistance on the job. These networks of co-workers are important for all employees including employees with IDD, but people with IDD may need some encouragement to reach out to their colleagues.

Here are some other ways you can help the employee build a strong network with co-workers.

Make sure the employee feels included in the workplace by encouraging them to interact with their co-workers. Let the employee know where their co-workers eat lunch, and include him or her in office birthday celebrations and out-of-work activities (such as the office softball team or community service).

Be a bridge between the employee with a disability and others. Let the employee know which co-workers would be a good person to ask for help, and let those co-workers know that you think they would be a good resource for the employee.

### 5. Work directly with the employee on a project.

We found that we did our best supervision when we worked on the same projects together. This allowed us to have a sense of what was happening during the employee's work week and the project responsibilities that had been assigned, and to help the employee identify tasks that she needed help completing.

How to keep meaningfully involved:

- » Be involved in the same projects as the employee.
- » Attend staff meetings with the employee.
- » Check in with co-workers to see what they think is and is not working well for the employee.

## Four Tips to Support Career Advancement and Long-Term Job Satisfaction

Employees with IDD also face issues related to career advancement and long-term satisfaction in their work. Based on our experience, we have developed four tips to successfully lay the groundwork for professional advancement:

- » 1. Take steps to improve the employee's skills and abilities.
- » 2. Help the employee become more efficient in his or her current responsibilities.
- » 3. Build the employee's proficiency through using general office technology.
- » 4. Take a long-term view of the employee's career.

### 1. Take steps to improve the employee's skills and abilities.

Successful supervision of employees with IDD is assisted if a plan is prepared that is explicit about the employee's responsibilities. The plan should be reviewed frequently with the employee. Sharing the plan with the employee will allow them time to ask questions about the tasks and to make sure they understand their responsibilities.

For example, during supervisory meetings, we found that doing first-hand scheduling with the employee helped us to understand and plan out her workflow in a more efficient way. In our case, we built the plan by entering tasks into the employee's Microsoft Outlook calendar.

How to plan ahead and communicate your plan:

- » Know whether or not your employee can pick up a new job responsibility on the fly or may need more support and training.
- » Know what you are going to ask your employee to do before they ask you what they should do next.
- » Know who is the best person to provide instruction on a new task. Is it you, a co-worker, or an employment specialist?
- » Know the best way to give the employee instructions: verbal, written, hands-on demonstration, or video.
- » Consider developing a checklist in written, picture, or another format that can easily be reordered. An employment specialist can help with this.

### 2. Help the employee to become more efficient in his or her current responsibilities.

Time management can be a challenge for people with IDD on the job. Traditionally the solution has been to provide intensive paid 1:1 on-the-job support. While paid employment supports can be important to many people's success, many employers see them as a disruption in their place of business.

### 3. Build the employee's proficiency through using general office technology.

The line between office and home technology has become increasingly blurred. Therefore, you can use the employee's technology skills from outside the office to build their proficiency in general office technology.

As you build this skill, ask what tools the employee uses outside of the office to communicate with family and friends over the Internet. Do they use email, instant messaging, video conferencing, a smart phone, or a tablet? These technologies can provide an opportunity for the employee with IDD to generalize skills to the world of work.

For some individuals, requesting support from their employment specialist and/or from your state's department of vocational rehabilitation can be helpful.

### 4. Take a long-term view of the employee's career.

Every employee is on a career path. In order to grow professionally, all employees should be expected to improve their skills and receive the support to do so. This is no different for people with IDD.

How to support opportunities for career development:

- » **Mentor the employee.** Mentoring is about guidance through one's career. For example, expose the employee to other projects that the business completes. Periodically ask the employee, "Is there anyone's job at this company you'd like to learn more about?"
- » **Help the employee report and track their professional growth.** Periodically ask yourself, "What additional responsibilities could the individual complete?"

Take the time during formal performance evaluations to identify professional development and leadership experiences that meet the employee's goals, such as education and skills training.

## Conclusion

Our experiences supervising individuals with disabilities have helped us learn a few helpful lessons along the way. While every employer and employee is different, we think these lessons are helpful for employers who are concerned about how to best supervise individuals with IDD. If you have other methods you have found successful, we would love to learn about them, and we encourage you to use the ideas we have developed in your supervision.

## Selected Further Readings

- Kramer, J., Wolfe, A., & Winsor, J. (2013). Support through mentorship: Accessible supervision of employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Tools for Inclusion series, no. 29. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.
- Timmons, J. C., Hall, A. C., Bose, J., Wolfe, A., & Winsor, J. (2011). Choosing employment: Factors that impact employment decisions for individuals with intellectual disability. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 49*(4), 285–299.
- Migliore, A., Mank, D., Grossi, T., & Rogan, P. (2007). Integrated employment or sheltered workshops: Preferences of adults with intellectual disabilities, their families, and staff. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 26*, 5–19.
- Nonnemacher, S. L., & Bambara, L. M. (2011). "I'm supposed to be in charge": Self-advocates' perspectives on their self-determination support needs. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 49*(5), 327–340.
- Walker, A. (2011). Checkmate! A self-advocate's journey through the world of employment. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 49*(4), 310–312.



Funded in part by the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, contract # 835EM11 and Access to Integrated Employment at the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston, a project supported in part by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Administration for Community Living, US



Department of Health and Human Services, under cooperative agreement #90DN0295.

