



Guidance to Community Rehabilitation Program Executive Directors for the Coming Employment 1st Decade

Cary Griffin, CEO
Griffin-Hammis Associates

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Today, thousands of Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) face a tsunami of change. The Employment First movement, led by a host of progressive grassroots state initiatives and fortified by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) at the U.S. Department of Labor, the Administration on Community Living (ACL), various Department of Education (ED) projects, and the national Workforce system bolstered by critical elements of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), is gaining ground in over 40 states. The Department of Justice (DOJ) is feverishly enforcing the spirit and the letter of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Supreme Court's Olmstead Decision concerning equal access and inclusion, while Medicaid, the longtime funder of segregated employment and residential programs, finally stepped up to endorse meaningful community integration through their HCBS Settings Rule. School transition to employment is now pushing past its previous reliance on process improvement (i.e., writing compliant Individual Education Plans) toward meaningful post graduate outcomes led by creative teachers, progressive advocates, families, and Vocational Rehabilitation's implementation of Pre-Employment Training Services (Pre-ETS) that focus on community skill building.

CRPs that, in the past, considered community employment (e.g., Supported and/or Customized Employment) an add-on program or one option among a menu of service choices, now face the reality of community employment as the first option for individuals with significant disabilities they serve. This is not a minor change in strategic direction. CRPs must comply, adapt, perform, or slowly fade into irrelevance. Billing families through private pay options to avoid the HCBS Settings Rule is off the table. Inclusion is now the law, the rule, the civil rights imperative, and using private money in lieu of public funding doesn't change or slow the enforcement of these rules.

Pursuant to success in this turbulent environment, new leadership behavior and guidance is needed at the local level. (It's needed at the State level as well, but that's another article). Perhaps in the past, leaders could "keep their noses in, and their hands off," but no longer. Activist leadership is desperately needed to guide agencies and vocational personnel through the coming decade of change. As someone who works regularly with State and Federal programs

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and policy makers, with school transition administrators and teachers; who is in family homes conducting Discovery activities; who mentors Employment Specialists in worksite supports and job development; who consults with VR Counselors; and has a career of almost 40 years ranging from front line, minimum wage positions, to middle management, to CEO; and who has consulted with hundreds of community rehabilitation programs in 6 countries, I humbly offer this condensed advice.

- 1. *Helping people find and keep jobs is the toughest work in the agency.*** No doubt the work of CEOs and Program Directors is crucial and consuming, ranging from Board development, financial oversight, personnel management, strategic planning, etc. It's tough work, and there's a lot of it. But the work of Employment Specialists is different. There aren't typically support staff who can help out with the heavy lifting of employer engagement, and the daily pressure to hit performance milestones, while everyone watches, is palpable. The work is outcomes-driven and transparent. Everyone witnesses the eventual failures. The work is often performed on a shoestring budget with minimal monetary or status reward. The pressure on staff to perform is intense. It's time to treat the work of Employment Specialists respectfully and as the major focus of leadership attention. This means proper training, robust supervisory support, and pay that reflects the effort.
- 2. *Do not suggest people should fail and learn from their mistakes.*** Yes, it sounds great coming from a management guru, but it's awful advice; it's expensive and demoralizing. Instead, encourage reading and guided study from quality sources. Invest in staff development and expertise; learn from the work of others in order to avoid mistakes. Platitudes are no substitute for enhanced pay and respect. Employment Specialists are a CRP's master craftsmen -- its artisans. Develop their talent for the future.
- 3. *Hire like you mean it.*** Instead of accepting high turnover rates as inevitable, study agencies with low turnover. The best organizations pay respectable wages. They hire people full-time and commit to them. Part-time employment due to the lack of an "investment culture" is common in not-for-profits. Referrals (and reimbursement rates) typically increase for organizations that have a consistent and competent workforce. Staff working full-time at reasonable pay won't be so quick to jump ship. Identify and capture potential savings that can be used for wage increases by minimizing agency efforts that do not lead to employment. Community work is the new target outcome and redirecting resources away from other unfocused or irrelevant programs is where savings arise.
- 4. *Adopt Purposeful Purchasing Policies.*** Take advantage of your supply chains based on mutual benefit. When going out to bid for groceries for the residential program, choosing a property maintenance firm, or selecting an agency's Bank, negotiate options that include using that company's site(s) for community-based assessment, worksite learning, on-the-job training, and of course for positions with growth potential. Business respects quid pro quo and often needs help understanding how to be of service to people with disabilities. School transition programs should pursue commitments from School Board members as well to leverage their personal,

social and economic networks to advance the careers of future graduates, find options for community-based assessments, and for after-school and summer jobs. Schools in many rural communities are the largest local employer, but seldom use their power (through their supply chain) to leverage jobs or community-based training opportunities for special education students.

- 5. Create greater Intimacy with the Community.** CRPs most often operate at the fringes of their community. Ample State and Federal funding allows many CRPs to create parallel communities, operating their own transit systems, places of employment, housing, and segregated recreation. When a town addresses economic development, educational improvement, transportation, recreational and other civic concerns, CRPs are seldom at the table. All these issues are universal. CRPs have tangible assets and experience. Get in there and help. Become a partner. Advocate for inclusion. Make certain self-advocacy plays a role as well. Building mutually beneficial relationships in the community leads to reciprocal opportunities for engaging people with disabilities and staff in the fabric of a community's future.
- 6. Learn job development.** Overseeing a process in which one has little direct knowledge is difficult. Know your product so it can be properly organized, supervised, evaluated and improved. There's an old saying: A problem is easier to solve the farther one moves from it. If employment is the change agent pushing an organization in new directions, learning the methodology of job development may be crucial to survival, and besides, your employment team will grow to respect you for trying.
- 7. Leverage Respected-others' Networks.** Create an Active Employer Council (AEC) and fund it properly (see Chapter 5 of *The Job Developer's Handbook*¹). An AEC consists of a small group of diverse local business owners. Monthly they assemble for a structured meeting, led by the AEC President and the AEC Manager (a CRP staffer). They meet one or two employment candidates served by the CRP, review that individual's digital Portfolio and hear that individual's career goals. Then a couple members volunteer assist in "warming up" job development calls by arranging meetings through their social and business contacts that have relevance to the employment seeker's goals. AECs create an opportunity to enhance intimacy and action within a community by leveraging personal and professional power.
- 8. Invest in Training & Mentorship for employment staff.** Again, a CRP's face in the community is that of the Employment Specialist. Train them to be proficient in the methods vital to success. This includes mastery of real job development (not job finding at Box Stores), Discovery, job analysis, job creation, Resource Ownership, interest-based employer negotiation, natural support facilitation, systematic instruction, behavioral support, job site fading, etc. Understanding the nuance of community employment processes and applying the right amount of knowledge at the right time takes many months and, in some cases years, to learn. This skilled trade requires on-going investment.

1 Griffin, C.C., Hammis, D., & Geary, T. (2009). *The Job Developer's Handbook: Practical Tactics for Customized Employment*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, Co.

9. *Quality is money.* The best agencies attract the best talent and get the highest return on investment. Outcomes matter more than ever in the Employment First Decade. While many reimbursement rates are standardized, individual rates can often be negotiated and, of course, referrals and income increase with success, helping establish an economy of scale that allows for enhanced pay and status for Employment Specialists. Even today, the rates are promising. In many locales, assessment, job development and initial coaching reflect a \$50 per hour rate. Paying 50% of this to the Employment Specialist (including 30% for fringe) leaves comfortable overhead earnings to a CRP that can also multiply profits by cutting those aforementioned less relevant programs and by leveraging Social Security Work Incentives such as Plans for Achieving Self-Support (PASS). Figuring a 2,080-hour work year at \$25 per hour generates \$52,000, or roughly \$15,600 for fringe benefits and \$36,400 in salary. This is a reasonable starting point.

10. *Move to an Employment Specialist model to reduce confusion and improve consistency.*

Employers, consumers, funders, and families react negatively to on-going staff changes. Employers often remark that they have new coaches coming in and out of their operation much too frequently. The other stakeholders complain as well about the lack of consistency, communication, and methodology that varies from staffer to staffer. While sometimes cumbersome, having the same person or a consistent team of people involved in an individual's employment is critical. The Employment Specialist that leads Discovery, heads up employer engagement and job development, and provides the essential initial job coaching is the single point of contact everyone needs. That consistency reduces variation in process, naturally clarifies communication, and shows professionalism across all environments.

Not all CEOs or Program Directors have the time or inclination for every step, but someone in a leadership role needs to take on these tasks to prosper from the looming change. The Employment First Decade is upon us. Change is inevitable, but success is not. There's a new imperative for change and adaptation. The methods, funding, and policies exist for success. Now we have to embrace the move to community.

For more information on organizational transformation and Customized Employment, please contact Cary Griffin at cgriffin@griffinhammis.com or visit www.griffinhammis.com.