A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization

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"It does my heart good": How employers perceive supported employees

JUDITH SANDYS

For most adults in our society, work provides not only economic resources, but also a wide range of noneconomic benefits, including status, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and self-actualization. Those who do not work are stigmatized, kept poor, and, if considered unable to work (rather than merely unwilling), looked upon as objects of pity and charity (Anthony, 1977; Macarov, 1980; Ozawa, 1982; Rinehart, 1987; Stone, 1984). It is therefore not surprising that studies confirm that for most people, working is an important determinant of quality of life (Chestang, 1982; Michalos, 1986; O'Toole, 1974; Warr, 1987).

Historically, people with intellectual disabilities have been excluded from workforce participation. Perceived as dependent and in need of care, they have had to rely on the state for their resources. Because this group is seen as "deserving," they have typically been treated more generously than those perceived as able to work but not willing to. Nonetheless, exclusion from workforce participation has served to cut them off from both the economic and noneconomic benefits of work and to deny their status as full citizens (Murphy & Rogan, 1995; Oliver, 1990).

In recent years there has been an ever increasing emphasis on promoting opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to work in regular settings within the community. One manifestation of this has been the development of the supported employment model. Traditionally, vocational rehabilitation programs sought to provide training (most often within sheltered workshop settings) to individuals with regard to work skills and behaviors, and then to find jobs for those assessed as "job ready." Unlike this train-then-place approach, supported employment programs utilize a place-then-train framework—the individual is placed in a work situation consistent with their interests and talents, and training and support are provided at the work site in order to ensure the success of the work situation. The underlying assumption is that the nature and quality of support ensures "success," rather than "readiness" for employment. First developed in the United States in the mid-1970s, supported employment programs have expanded rapidly in that country and more recently in Canada (Annable, 1989; McLoughlin, Garner & Callahan, 1987; Murphy & Rogan, 1995; Wehman, Kregel, Shafer, & West, 1989; Wehman & Moon, 1988; West, Revell, & Wehman, 1992; Revell, Wehman, Kregel, West, & Rayfield, 1994).

This article presents the findings of a study that explores the perspectives of employers of people with intellectual disabilities hired through the involvement of supported employment programs. Using in-depth qualitative interviews, 21 employers in 18 different employment settings were interviewed. The study explores how these employers explain and understand their involvement with the program, their perceptions of the individual they have hired, and their views on the issue of employment of people with intellectual disabilities in general.
1 THEORETICAL CONTEXT

An underlying premise of this article is that issues relating to workforce participation for people with intellectual disabilities can only be understood within a wider context that looks at work and disability as they relate to the welfare state in a capitalist society. Perceptions of what constitutes work and who is able to work, the meanings attached to work, and the strategies undertaken to encourage workforce participation (for those assumed to be able to work) are all shaped by the perceived needs of a capitalist economy and the values inherent therein. At the same time, within the welfare state there are ideals of humanitarianism, equality, and justice, a belief that the state has some responsibility to ensure a minimum level of well-being to all citizens, and in particular to those who are perceived as unable to provide for themselves. More than 3 decades ago, Wilensky and Lebeaux (1965) spoke of the ongoing "compromise between the values of economic individualism and free enterprise on the one hand, and security, equality and humanitarianism on the other" (pp. 138-139).

Within any society there is a configuration of dominant values to which most members of that society subscribe. These values comprise the "implicit or explicit conceptions of what individuals consider to be either ideal ends or desirable means of achieving these ends" (George & Wilding, 1985, p. 127). Invariably, there will be contradictions among values, forcing choices and compromises among them. The shared value base of a society affects not only the behavior of individuals within it, but also the way societal problems are defined and in the policies that are developed to deal with these (Deakin, 1987; Gilbert, 1983; Gilbert & Specht, 1986; Hindess, 1987).

All this is highly consistent with Social Role Valorization (SRV) theory (Wolfensberger, 1983, 1985, 1992), which posits a relationship between the treatment accorded to people with disabilities and the extent to which they are valued or devalued within society. "Human perceptual processes," notes Wolfensberger (1992), "are by their very nature evaluative" (p. 2). Since we cannot avoid making evaluative judgments about what we perceive, all people are perceived positively or negatively by others. Hence, "devaluation is something that is done to another person by a perceiver; it is not something which is inherent in the person perceived" (p. 2). SRV theory contends that the process of being identified as different and negatively valued (stigmatized) will have a profound effect on the individual's identity and subsequent behavior. However, SRV/Normalization theory challenges the seeming inevitability of a deviant and devalued status and identity based on disability (or other source of stigma) and suggests that the negative impact of a particular negatively valued attribute may be offset if the person is perceived to fill positively valued roles in society. Just as negative roles confer devalued status, so positive ones confer valued status. Given the high value placed on work, those who are unable, or who are perceived as unable, to work as a result of a disability are likely to be devalued and treated accordingly. The goal of Social Role Valorization is to enable people with disabilities or other conditions that confer a devalued status to move from that status to one that is valued within society. Supported employment programs are seemingly highly consistent with Social Role Valorization theory in their attempt to enable people with disabilities to fulfill the valued role of worker. This study seeks to examine the manner in which the dominant and often contradictory values in our society are expressed in employer responses concerning people with intellectual disabilities. Further, it examines the extent to which the role of worker, a role that is highly valued within our society, affects the way people with intellectual disabilities are perceived by employers and explores the impact of supported employment practices on these perceptions.

It is important to note that this is not a study of the experiences of supported employees but one that focuses on employers of supported employees. Since Social Role Valorization theory emphasizes the impact of perception, and since employers play a pivotal role in determining whether an individual with an intellectual disability will gain access to their workplace, it is important to understand their perceptions if we are to develop policies and practices that promote more positive outcomes. As Oliver (1990) notes, "it is not disabled people who need to be examined but able-bodied society; it is not a case of educating disabled and non-disabled people for integration, but of fighting institutional disabilism" (p. 112).
2 METHODS

This study used a qualitative design. "The phenomenological basis of the qualitative approach means that the researcher studies how informants make meaning out of their situations" (Biklen & Moseley, 1988, p. 155). In this instance, it is believed that the data generated through in-depth qualitative interviews of a small number of employers would generate more significant and useful information than, for example, would a survey type questionnaire to a much larger sample.

Participants were located primarily through contacts with organizations that operated supported employment programs in or near Toronto. For the purposes of this study, the term "employer" was operationalized to include those who had decision-making authority with regard to hiring, and those who were involved in the development and/or implementation of hiring policy. It included some employers who were not paying people a regular (i.e., minimum wage or better) salary and several who did not have ongoing supervisory responsibility for a specific supported employee. Since the goal of the study was to explore a wide range of employer perspectives, respondents were selected to provide as much diversity as possible, in terms of the characteristics of the employers, employment settings, and jobs.

Interviews were generally about 1 1/2 hours in length. While an interview guide was used to ensure that key topics were covered with each employer, questions were informal and open-ended. As Patton (1980) notes, "the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms." In all instances, employers were very eager to talk and to share their views, resulting in a great deal of rich and detailed data. Except in two instances (one where the tape recorder malfunctioned, the other where the person so chose) all interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed eliminating identifying information. Because the focus was explicitly on the experiences of the employers, there was no systematic observation of the supported employees nor were they interviewed. However, on a less formal basis there were often opportunities to observe supported employees at their jobs, to talk with them, and to observe interaction between employers and supported employees.

In the tradition of qualitative research, data analysis began almost at the outset of the study, after which data collection and analysis continued simultaneously (see, for example, Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Memos and field notes served to capture initial impressions, thoughts, and hunches (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Spradley, 1979). These were helpful in identifying emerging themes that were used to construct typologies or classification schemes as a basis for interpreting the data. The informal observational data enhanced the interpretation of the interview data, often providing behavioral confirmation of the themes expressed by the employers.

3 THE PEOPLE AND THE PLACES

Three of the interviews were with employers who were not directly involved with a supported employee on an ongoing basis. This included three women (in two interviews) from human resource departments of large corporations and one man from a setting where a person had been employed until shortly before the interview took place. The women, who ranged in age from late 20s to mid-30s, all had university degrees; the man, in his late 30s, had no university education.

The employers in direct contact with supported employees were quite diverse in terms of gender, age, and educational level. Of the 17 employees, 11 were men and 6 were women. They ranged in age from early 20s to over 60 and included those with university degrees, some university or community college education, high school, or less. Employment settings included small and large enterprises, service and manufacturing organizations, for-profit and nonprofit settings. Settings with supported employees included: catering service, hotel kitchen, hospital audiovisual department, bank, fast-food restaurant, factories, car dealership, municipal planning department, administrative offices, and a discount department store.
The employers involved in this study were employing a total of 16 people with intellectual disabilities hired through supported employment programs, including one setting where there were two people. Supported employees ranged in age from the early 20s to late 40s, with most being between 25 and 35. They had been employed for as little as 6 months and as long 4½ years, with between 1 and 2 years being most typical. Of the 16 supported employees, 8 were working full-time and 8 were working part-time. All those who worked part-time were paid minimum wage or above (up to $10.25 per hour). Of the eight who worked full-time, two were paid above minimum wage. The remaining six were paid amounts ranging from nothing (one person) to $60 per week.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 THE DECISION TO HIRE: BALANCING ALTRUISM AND PRODUCTIVITY

The process that culminated with the hiring of the person with an intellectual disability was sometimes initiated by the employer but more frequently by the supported employment program. Where employer-initiated, employers generally related this to reasons of self-interest, most often related to productivity concerns—labor shortages or the need for low-cost labor:

The thought was a cost-saving measure for the dishwashing area. To be quite honest, that was the first thought.

It’s very hard to get help . . . We’re a manufacturing concern and it’s just very plain repetitive work. It’s very competitive and we can’t afford to pay gross premiums for our labor. So we started looking for alternate sources of employment.

I think Fast Food would admit that starting this program [to hire people with disabilities] was not altogether out of altruistic motives, but that it was out of necessity. They had a labor crunch, really the worst labor crunch ever. They had to find alternate sources of employees. They found an untapped pool.

One employer indicated that his company had initiated contact with the supported employment program in order to fulfill employment equity requirements.

More common were the situations where the supported employment program approached an employer. In these instances employers gave various rationales to explain their decision to hire the individual. While in some instances the decision was clearly related to self-interest (the person was perceived to be able to do a particular job or task successfully, or would help to meet employment equity targets), more typically employers perceived their decision, at least in part, to be based on altruistic or humanitarian concerns. They interpreted the request from the supported employment program as a request to help. When asked if the organization would have hired the young woman whom they were employing even if she had only been able to do one very simple task, one employer commented:

Yes, we probably would have. But you have to understand that the owners of this lab are very charitable people . . . they care very much.

Others related their decision to a desire to be fair, using words similar to these employers:

Everybody should have a chance. These people want to work like everybody else. Why shouldn’t they?

You give everybody a chance.

Everybody deserves a chance.

Nevertheless, altruistic/humanitarian motives tended to be constrained by productivity-related concerns. People had the “right” to work, but only if they were able to do the job.

I think that they deserve just as much a chance.

As it’s the right job . . . I think that’s the bottom line.

Employers generally felt that in order to be employed, people had to be able to do some productive work, although the amount that was considered acceptable varied considerably. As well, employers often felt that some medical conditions (e.g., severe seizures), the inability to comprehend and follow directions, and/or the presence of unacceptable behaviors such as extreme aggressiveness would preclude employment. They did not see everybody as being able to work.
4.2 DIFFERENCES AND CHALLENGES: DILEMMAS OF SUPPORT WITHIN THE WORKPLACE

Employers reported that the experience of employing a person with an intellectual disability differed in many respects from their usual experiences and often presented significant challenges.

The supported employees often took longer to learn the tasks required of them, thereby requiring more input from the employer and coworkers: “I find that if you give them half a chance, and you’re patient with them—it’s a matter of repetition, constant repetition, which at times can drive you pretty well around the bend.”

In terms of behavior, the supported employees were often perceived to be very childlike:

[Referring to a woman in her late 20s:]

I realized that I had to treat her as someone who is much younger, like someone who is in the sixth or eighth grade, someone who needed to be told what to do and what was expected of her. But she has really progressed. Now I can treat her as a young woman of mid high school age...

Bob likes to be pampered. He likes it when you tell him what to do or scold him. He puts his head down and grins. You can tell that he likes it. You have to treat him like a 10-year-old child...

We have to treat Tom like he’s a 10-year-old...

With all due respect, I find I relate to him more like a 5-year old...

She’s like a kid.

Some supported employees were reported to exhibit behaviors that were menacing or disruptive, including “fake seizures,” emotional outbursts, destruction of property when upset, strange mannerisms, and poor grooming and/or hygiene.

You really have to watch him when he gets a cold, because he starts taking cold medication and he flips out on cold medication. . . . You won’t know what he’s going to do. One day he locked himself in a car and wouldn’t get out.

If he thinks he’s made an error he will start doing a jerking motion with his head and his arms and will fling them open to a point where it’s almost like a bird taking flight.

As a result, employers reported engaging in tasks they did not usually encounter with nondisabled employees.

Something else we did that we felt would help was for her to bring in a log book. We wrote down specific jobs she had to do each day . . . then at the end of the day I would write down what she did, whether she had a good day or a bad day.

He has a problem with body odour. . . . Sometimes people he works with will complain that it is so bad they can’t stand to work with him. When that happens I have to talk with him. I tell him that he has to be clean, that people don’t like it. . . . After that he will be fine for quite a while. But then it starts again.

Employers were not alone in their efforts to deal with the challenges presented by the supported employee. They had available to them the assistance of a staff person from the supported employment program (referred to here as the support worker). As is typical for such programs, the support worker was very involved when the supported employee first began working, and became less active as the person adjusted to the work and the workplace. Overall, employers felt very positively about the program staff, seeing them as competent and caring people. While there were occasional complaints about staff turnover, or about something a support worker did or did not do, these were very much the exception.

One role of the support worker was to assist in training the supported employee to do the required tasks. While for some employers this was very important, others felt that they could do any required training themselves. More important was assistance when problems arose with the person’s behavior. If the person was late repeatedly or did not show up for work, if the person seemed upset or exhibited troublesome or inappropriate behavior, if the person’s work performance worsened, if there were difficulties between the person and other employees—in these and other situations, the employer was expected to contact the supported employment program so that the reasons for the difficulties could be explored and remedial action developed. Where problems persisted, the support worker remained very much involved. Generally, employers felt that the support worker played a key role in the success of the placement.

Employers identified closely with the staff of the supported employment program and saw themselves working collaboratively with them. They saw themselves not simply hiring a particular individual, but being a part of a program designed to assist people with intellectual disabilities: “[It is satisfying] just
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participating in a program like this and dealing with the people.”

4.3 EMPLOYER SATISFACTION: GAINING SATISFACTION THROUGH THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYEES

For virtually all the employers interviewed in this study, the experience of employing a person with an intellectual disability through a supported employment program had proven to be a very positive experience. The supported employees were seen to be reliable and hardworking: “She’s a very good employee. She’s extremely reliable. . . I feel confident in leaving her in the unit if I happen to be called out.”

Employers spoke about the variety of tasks that their handicapped employees have been able to learn: “She spends a lot of her time assembling planning documents for us, punching them, putting them in numerical order and assembling them on a plastic ring. She does photocopying and she delivers newspapers within the department once a week. . . [Also] lots of folding of maps and plans, and putting them in their proper slots.”

Sometimes this contributed to the overall efficiency of the operation: “She has taken away some of the jobs that the technicians were doing to let them do more complicated things. And it’s actually helped us, because it has to be done regardless.”

However, even more important to these employers were the benefits that were seen to accrue to the supported employee. These employers reported that work was very important in their own lives. They described themselves as workaholics and indicated that they had worked hard to achieve success. The importance of work for them extended beyond the remuneration it generated. In discussing the benefits of working for the supported employees they again focused on the noneconomic benefits, only rarely mentioning financial benefits. (In fact, for a significant number of people the financial benefits were modest or nonexistent.)

They were impressed with the individual’s motivation to work: “It’s very inspiring to see a man with such limited mental ability trying so hard and succeeding and accomplishing things.”

They talked about the person’s development and improved well-being—skills they had acquired, ability to relate to people, maturity, self-esteem, sense of self worth, sense of belonging, and so forth:

She’s certainly more sociable. . . . Now she looks at you in the face and talks to you directly. . . .

We’ve given her the chance to feel that she’s doing a job and that she’s a needed person. . . . And I think we’ve also done wonders for her self-confidence. . . .

It’s inspiring. . . . It’s incredible how much he has developed.

To have played a part in bringing about these benefits was clearly a source of satisfaction to these employers:

To know that we’ve provided an opportunity for these individuals to work and everything that goes with that. I’m not talking about the money so much as the self-esteem and the feeling of belonging much more than they would otherwise have.

I like working with Bob. I like working with slower people. It gives you a good feeling if you can teach them something, if they are out there working.

It does my heart good to see how much he has developed.

4.4 EMPLOYER RESPONSES TO EMPLOYMENT EQUITY/AFFIRMATIVE ACTION; CHOICE OR OBLIGATION?

While employers articulated a belief in the “right” of people with intellectual disabilities to work in the community, described the experience as positive, and felt that more employers should be encouraged to hire such individuals, there was little support for strengthened employment equity/affirmative action legislation that might require employers to hire people with disabilities.

In this regard, this group was not different from many other employers. An informal survey of 30 employers by a Toronto consulting firm reported in The Globe and Mail (Gibb-Clark, 1991) reiterated some of the common sources of opposition to any kind of quota system. The primary reason given by those employers was that to impose quotas would undermine the merit system that is at the very heart of our economy.

While the employers interviewed for this study did on occasion raise this objection, they tended more often to frame their response in very different terms. Rather than simply opposing such legislation because
it might not be in their own best business interests, they maintained that it would not be in the interests of people with disabilities. They argue that forcing employers to hire people with disabilities would result in employers resenting their presence. Under these circumstances, they would not exhibit the same kind of care and concern for the well-being of the disabled employee:

I don't think you can force it on employers... It would be very difficult for an individual with a handicap to cope with a hostile situation.

You would have a negative attitude on the part of the employer right off the bat.

Furthermore, if forced to hire, it was argued, employers would seek people with the most minimal handicaps and ignore those with more seriously handicapping conditions.

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Given the amount of effort involved for employers, why do they feel so positive about the experience? The most cynical perspective would suggest that the direct benefits to the employer, whether in terms of providing "cheap labor," contributing to the efficiency of the operation, or helping to meet employment equity targets, outweighed any inconvenience to the employer. Certainly these motivations played a significant part in some situations. However, they would seem insufficient to explain the overwhelmingly positive attitudes of the employers or the sometimes considerable energy they devoted to making the situation successful.

Rather, it would seem that employers who hire people with intellectual disabilities through supported employment programs may interpret what they are doing within an ethic of care. They define what they are doing primarily in terms of "helping" someone, and come to measure their own success by the extent to which the person appears to benefit from the situation. While they do not, by any means, abandon their productivity expectations entirely, these may be modified by other considerations. The interpretation of hiring a person with an intellectual handicap as a humanitarian act may be strengthened by the involvement of the supported employment program. Employers often perceived the request from the supported employment program as a request to "help."

Interpreting the employment of people with intellectual disabilities within an ethic of care has a number of implications, both positive and negative. On the positive side, it seems to buy a higher level of tolerance for the person with the disability, increasing the range of challenges with which an employer is prepared to contend. Behaviors such as repeated lateness, absence, emotional outbursts, aggressiveness, and poor-quality work are responded to differently when the person is identified as having an intellectual disability and when the person has been placed in the job with the involvement of a supported employment program. While such behaviors would likely elicit a negative reaction—perhaps disciplinary action or even dismissal—in the case of a nonlabeled person, in the instance of a person with an intellectual disability hired through a supported employment program, these behaviors are interpreted as part of the person's "problem" and the employer assumes greater responsibility for trying to ameliorate them.

Because employers define their own success in terms of how well the person is perceived to be doing, there is an incentive for employers to invest their energy in eliciting positive outcomes. For these employers, work is something that is challenging and fulfilling; they work hard to ensure that it is so for the handicapped employee too. Helping the individual to expand the range of tasks they can do certainly contributes to the productivity or efficiency of the workplace. However, for these employers it is also a sign that they are being successful in terms of helping the individual to develop and grow. Some employers go to considerable lengths to enable the person to do different and more challenging tasks, even when there may be no direct or immediate benefits to that employer. In several instances employers arranged for the individual to work in a different department for part of the time, in order to provide new learning opportunities and challenges.

If this ethic of care has some positive outcomes, it also has some that are negative, in fact or potentially. At its worst, a mind-set in which the employer defines her/his role as providing a service that will contribute to the personal development of an individual may serve to obscure the fact that the person is performing work...
for which he or she should be appropriately remunerated. It may lead to situations where not paying the person according to the same standards as others is justified or legitimated by the perception that the employer is providing a service and that the person is benefiting in other ways. One finds situations where an individual's productivity was reported to be equal or similar to others doing the same job, but where the person was not receiving anything approaching the same rate of pay. Various rationales were offered for paying people less than minimum wage, including that pay was not important to the individual, that paying the person more might jeopardize his or her pension, or that paying a regular wage would create higher productivity expectation resulting in too much pressure on the person.

Employers in these situations rarely feel any sense that they are being exploitive. Indeed they take pride in the role they have played in contributing to the well-being of the individual and may even interpret not paying a regular wage as a necessary part of the helping process. The fact that they are realizing some economic or practical advantage is seen as fair exchange for the service that they are providing to the individual (e.g., promoting development) and to the larger society (e.g., taking care of the individual, reducing costs to government). An employer who is paying half of minimum wage explained: “The benefit is twofold. You are lowering the amount of money the government has to spend on taking care of people with intellectual handicaps and you are saving 50% of the wage.”

Another (potentially) negative outcome of the ethic of care is to reinforce the perception of the person with an intellectual handicap as dependent, childlike, and in need of care. Employers reported many childlike behaviors. Assuming that these are accurately reported (and there is no reason to assume otherwise), it is also true that employers spoke to and about people as though they were much younger than their chronological age. To what extent does perceiving people as childlike elicit childish behavior, and vice versa? Wolfensberger and Thomas (1983) speak of the power of “role expectancies and role circularities” (p. 25). We know that the expectations we hold of people have a powerful influence in shaping the behaviors that are elicited, and that these in turn will serve to reinforce our initial expectations. While it is impossible to determine the extent to which employer expectations influenced the way people were perceived and responded to, and the impact of this on their subsequent behavior, one can assume some interrelationship between these elements.

It is important to note that negative role expectancies surround people with disabilities throughout their lives. They are socialized into their role as dependent and childlike over many years and in many settings. The foregoing discussion is not meant to suggest that employers alone create or sustain these roles, nor that it is entirely within their power to change them or the behaviors they may have elicited. It is to suggest that the idea that enabling a person with a disability to work in the community can or will suddenly erase this history is unrealistic. Instead, the employers may get entangled in the web of role expectancies that has been woven around the person. While there were many positive benefits reported for the people with disabilities who were working for these employers, in a good many situations this did not affect the perception of them as dependent and childlike.

The involvement of the supported employment program was in many ways reassuring to the employers, offering support and assistance with difficulties that arose. It drew in the employer as part of the helping team that would, together, assist the person with the disability. It provided an opportunity for the employers to see themselves in the new role of helper or counselor. All this drew the employer into a situation where new rules applied, where success is measured not in productivity or dollars, but in terms of personal development, growth, and self-esteem. At the same time, the message of the supported employment program is that this is a person who is “different,” who may act in unusual ways, who needs to be handled differently and with particular skill.

Employers may interpret what they are doing as a humanitarian or altruistic act, regardless of their initial motivation for hiring the person, and regardless of the extent to which there are material benefits accruing from the person's employment. Because hiring such an individual is seen as falling within the purview of altruism, employers are very resistant to any thoughts of legislation that might compel them to do so. While they may decry the prejudices, callousness, and
insensitivity of other employers, or speak eloquently about the "right" to work of people with disabilities, ultimately hiring a person with an intellectual handicap is defined as an altruistic act that employers should be encouraged but cannot be compelled to do. They say, in effect: "I do it because I am a kind and generous person and I want to help. But don't try to force me to do it."

Essentially these employers were maintaining that efforts to legislate the employment of people with disabilities, including those with intellectual handicaps, would take the act of hiring such an individual out of the arena of altruism. To employ such a person would be a legal obligation, rather than an altruistic response. In such an event, many of the rewards that accrued to the employer, in terms of defining themselves (and being defined by others) as a good and caring person, would be at risk of being lost.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study deals with employers who have hired people with intellectual disabilities with the involvement of supported employment programs. Because no effort was made to select a representative sample, it is very possible that the employers who were located through contacts with supported employment programs represent those whom the agencies considered particularly successful. Generalizations from this population to any other must be made with extreme caution. One cannot assume that the responses on all issues are characteristic of all employers. The study does not answer the question as to why some employers hire people with intellectual handicaps and some do not. It does not answer the question as to why some placements "succeed" and some do not. Nevertheless, the study does help to identify some of the challenges inherent in efforts to promote valued roles for people with intellectual disabilities through workforce participation in the context of a society that places a high value on productivity at the same time as it seeks to promote equality and humanitarianism. It demonstrates the impact of the value base of welfare capitalism on the meanings that employers attach to their experiences with supported employees and on how such individuals are perceived.

There is growing evidence that supported employment programs have failed to meet their initial promise (Mank, 1994; Wehman & Kregel, 1995). While the number of people in supported employment programs has continued to increase, the number of people in segregated employment has increased even faster. Supported employment initiatives have had minimal impact on those with the most severe disabilities. Further, supported employment often means part-time employment, low wages, and continued social isolation. Despite this, supported employment programs represent a far more positive alternative than segregated, sheltered settings. Research on the outcomes of supported employment programs indicate that people take pride in having a "real job," experience increased self-esteem, learn new skills, and are perceived as more independent and more confident by those who know them. Generally, they express considerable satisfaction in working in the community despite any shortcomings they experience with their particular job (Inge, Banks, Wehman, Hill, & Shafer, 1988; Moseley, 1987, 1988; Pedlar, Lord, & Van Loon, 1989).

Social Role Valorization theory is rich and complex, stressing the interplay between societal values and the devaluation of specific individuals, groups, and classes of people. It recognizes that people invariably fill multiple roles, with each having an impact on how people are perceived and treated within society. Nevertheless, there is perhaps a tendency for service providers to think that finding one particular valued role for an individual will overcome the impact of other, devalued, roles. This study does support the relationship between valued roles and positive life experiences. While outcomes were not entirely positive, as evidenced by work that was most often part-time and poorly paid (or not paid), the role of worker did affect the way that employers perceived the supported employee. While the focus of the study was not on the experiences of the supported employees, the data that were available in this regard did suggest many positive outcomes. However, while the role of worker may have had a positive impact, it did not overcome or erase the impact of the other more characteristic and negative roles into which people with disabilities are so often cast.
There is a tendency in the supported employment literature to presume that if service providers can only figure out how to do it "right," supported employment will yield the desired outcomes. One dramatic manifestation of this is the growing emphasis on "natural supports" (Hagner, 1992; Nisbet & Hagner, 1988; Rogan, 1996; Test & Wood, 1996), where it is presumed that support provided by coworkers is more "natural" and effective than program-generated support. Certainly seeking new and better ways to deliver supported employment services is a worthy goal, and this study does suggest some issues that supported employment programs need to address. Greater sensitivity to the way people with disabilities are interpreted in the workplace, careful modeling of appropriate behavior, efforts to minimize the employer's care-giving role, and a more clearly defined expectation that pay will be forthcoming all might be expected to have some impact. In particular, proponents of "natural support" must ensure that these efforts do not further reinforce the perception of supported employees as dependent and childlike.

Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the very existence of these programs, located within the social service system and designed with the specific purpose of helping this population fit into the existing structure of the workforce, has within it certain inherent limitations. This reinforces the perception of people with intellectual disabilities as being in need of care and suggests that it is the people with disabilities who need to change, rather than the society in which they live. As long as the task of enabling people with intellectual disabilities to work in the community is seen primarily as the responsibility of the social service sector, the people served by these programs are at risk of being interpreted as needing and receiving care, even when they are working and contributing. As long as employers feel that they are doing the individual a favor by hiring him or her, people with intellectual disabilities remain vulnerable to exploitation. Enabling people with intellectual disabilities to be accorded their full rights as citizens demands that we develop policies that support their inclusion in the workplace not as a favor, but as a right.

REFERENCES


SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT


