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The Consortium for Employment Success: Collaboration as a Strategy to Optimize
Employment Outcomes for People with Disabilities

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Abstract

Unemployment of individuals with disabilities has historically been, and remains, a significant problem. In this article we introduce the Consortium for Employment Success (CES) Model, a new strategy designed to increase collaboration among rehabilitation agencies (CES partners) to enhance employment opportunities for consumers. Most cooperation among rehabilitation agencies has operated at relatively low levels of operational collaboration. The CES model strives to produce a deeper level of collaboration by requiring CES partners to share employer development, job placement activities, and resources, thus becoming a collective resource for consumers and employers in the community. This article reviews literature related to collaboration, presents the conceptual framework of the CES model, and discusses some of the benefits and challenges in creating this type of collaboration.

The Consortium for Employment Success: Collaboration as a Tool to Optimize
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The data concerning the high unemployment of people with disabilities is stark and stubbornly consistent. People with disabilities have much higher unemployment rates than people without disabilities (Burkhauser & Houtenville, 2003). Many people with disabilities would like to work but cannot find appropriate employment (NOD, 2000; 2004); and when they do find a job, some people with disabilities struggle to retain their position (Gibbs, 1990; Mueser, Becker, & Wolfe, 2001). Further, employment rates of people with disabilities did not significantly improve, and may in fact have worsened (Burkhauser, Daly, & Houtenville, 2001) during the 1990's business cycle. While there is little doubt that the ADA has improved accessibility and opportunities for many people with disabilities (Silverstein, Julnes, & Nolan, 2005), much more needs to be done if consumers are to reach their goals of participating in, and benefiting equally from our society.

The challenge of assisting people with disabilities to find and retain appropriate employment has not gone unaddressed. The federal government, in partnership with the states as part of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program, has spent billions of dollars to provide placement assistance to people with disabilities. Along with VR, other public and private agencies--including thousands of not-for-profit community rehabilitation programs (CRP's)--provide numerous employment related services to people with disabilities in an attempt to help consumers enter and remain in the labor market. While many people have benefited from these placement and retention services, others have not.

While it is clear that employer attitudes are in part to blame for the high unemployment of people with disabilities, Hernandez, Keys, and Balcazar, (2000) found that employers expressed a willingness to hire people with disabilities but often did not because they perceived applicants with disabilities as being unqualified. This perception is consistent with research by Gilbride and Stensrud, (1993) who also found that employers reported a willingness to hire people with disabilities but were unable to recruit them. While these employer perceptions may be in part self justification, they might also point to the broader challenge of finding ways to narrow the gap between consumers and employers.

Millington, Miller, Asner-Self, and Linkowski, (2003) asserted that rehabilitation counselors must improve their ability to understand employer's needs and more clearly recognize how employers manage their personnel systems. They concluded that rehabilitation counselors must develop the skills necessary to partner with employers during the entire personnel process, and not just focus on the specific hiring event.

Gilbride, Stensrud, Vandergoot, and Golden (2003) found that many employers welcome thoughtful, timely, effective support in meeting their personnel needs and dealing with disability related issues. They found that employers who received ongoing support and assistance from rehabilitation professionals appreciated that assistance and believed that it increased their ability to successfully hire and accommodate people with disabilities. Employers also indicated that they would like "one point of contact" for all their disability related questions. Employers are often confused and frustrated by the myriad of providers in their communities. They often struggle with understanding the

differences between agencies and find the inconsistency of procedures and lack of responsiveness of some providers wearisome.

Vandergoot and Martin (1986) argued 20 years ago that placement professionals need to form cooperative partnerships with businesses to meet the shared goal of placing suitable workers in available job openings. Much research has been conducted over the past few decades (Fry, 1997; Gilbride & Stensrud, 1992; Vandergoot, 1987, 2000) documenting the importance of developing effective relationships with employers to improve employment opportunities for consumers. While most argue that partnerships with employers are necessary, in practice only minimal resources are committed to developing and maintaining these relationships (Gilbride, 2000). Most rehabilitation agencies feel that they are under-staffed and under-funded, and while they would like to commit more time to developing and maintaining employer partnerships, the ongoing and compelling needs of the current caseload consumes their time.

In order to meet the dual needs of employers (who would like one point of contact), and providers (who perceive themselves as already over-extended) we developed the Consortium for Employment Success (CES) Model. The CES consists of a group of placement/employment services professionals who have voluntarily agreed to enter into a structured consortium for the purpose of jointly partnering with employers to enhance job opportunities and retention of consumers. The CES extends the more common consortium/networking group concept to include shared resources and a centralized, contractual arrangement in which members work together at an operational level. As part of this objective, we hope to move the CES partners to a level of collaboration uncommon to the industry, where decisions and activities of the partnership

directly influence the manner in which service delivery is carried out in their respective agencies. Because the CES utilizes a more structured form of collaboration, it is important to understand the common factors related to successful collaboration. In this article we will define and outline the basic components and stages of effective collaboration, describe the CES model, and then discuss the benefits and challenges to both meaningful collaboration and the CES model.

Defining Collaboration from a Stage Model Perspective

Several definitions of collaboration have been generated in the education, mental health, and business fields (Frey, Lohmeier, Lee, Tollefson, & Lea-Johanning, 2004; George & Farris, 1999; Lei, Slocum, & Pitts, 1997; Wilford, 2006). Although there is some variability in these definitions, there are a number of common themes. According to Frey et al. (2004), collaboration refers to the way two or more entities cooperatively work together toward a common goal. Lei et al. (1997) further defined it as a “coalignment between two or more firms in which the partners seek to learn and acquire from each other products, skills, technologies, and knowledge that are not available to other competitors” (p. 203). If successful, the partners who join forces develop a competitive edge in achieving their individual and mutual goals. Mattessich, Murray-Close, and Monsey (2001) add that collaboration should be beneficial to all partners who are committed to sharing resources, rewards, responsibility, and accountability.

Measuring the success of collaboration is often achieved by examining its process and evolution. Through evaluation, one can learn about the factors that enhance or limit the ultimate outcome of the partnership in terms of its success. Fishman, Farrell, Allen, and Eiseman (2000) describe collaboration as a developmental process where the partners

move through a series of stages that begin with initial trust building to form working alliances. These stages provide a mechanism upon which one can evaluate the extent to which a working relationship has formed between the partners. Generally there are specific signs during each stage that provide clues as to whether the partnership is succeeding or failing in its development (Gray, 1989; Das & Teng, 2002). These signs, which will be discussed below, serve as a learning tool for those facilitating and participating in collaborative ventures.

Often partners enter into collaboration without fully understanding its purpose, developmental process, and/or dynamics. In fact, those actively involved in the partnership are sometimes different individuals from those who originally organized or agreed to participate in the collaboration (George & Farris, 1999). Consequently, there can be a breakdown in communication, leading to unclear expectations about how the group will develop. By clarifying the stages of collaboration, partners can formulate a clear expectation and image of how they believe the group will evolve overtime.

Several models of collaboration have been proposed in the literature (Fishman, Farrell, Allen, & Eiseman, 2000; Frey, Lohmeier, Lee, Tollefson, & Johanning, 2004; George & Farris, 1999; Gray, 1989). Many of these models describe a similar pattern of evolution in terms of the formation process that partners experience when collaborating. Each stage represents its own unique characteristics and challenges that must be met if the partnership is to become self-sustaining. Generally, most who have written on this topic agree that while in the beginning stages little or no collaboration occurs, in the later stages there is full collaboration and unification (Frey et al. 2004). We will present one

of these models to illustrate the characteristics that typically define each stage of collaboration.

The Lewin Group's Model of Collaboration asserts that the partners may go through five stages of interaction, depending on the group's objectives (Fishman, Farrell, Allen, & Eiseman, 2000). These stages include: co-existence, communication, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. During the co-existence stage, the partners may be aware of each other but have not historically interacted or worked together. Typically they know very little about one another in terms of each other's organizational make up.

If the collaboration advances to the communication stage, the partners begin to learn of and understand each other's historical background. There is an increased level of sharing about each entity's organizational make up. The communication, however, tends to be informal with no defined mission, group formation, or plan among the partners (Fishman, Farrell, Allen, & Eiseman, 2000). This is the level of collaboration most often seen between rehabilitation service providers in a local service delivery area.

Cooperation, the third stage of interaction, can be characterized by the partners formulating policies and practices that require an exchange of information and ideas. While extensive sharing may occur during this phase, the partners are not actively changing core practices within their own respective organizations. They also refrain from sharing decision making outside of the area of coordination (Fishman, Farrell, Allen, & Eiseman, 2000).

In the final stage of collaboration, the partners engage in shared planning and decision making which is transferred into each organization's business practices. The

partners are vested in a common goal that affects everyone collectively as opposed to any one organization. This type of collaboration requires significant time to establish, but once in place can produce the greatest benefit (Fishman, Farrell, Allen, & Eiseman, 2006). Only when a common vision is shared can the partners reap the benefits of a consortium (Johnson, Zorn, Tam, Lamontagne, & Johnson, 2003). It is this level of collaboration that the CES seeks to achieve.

Fishman, Farrell, Allen, and Eiseman (2000) assert that some partnerships will evolve to the final stage while others will remain static in one of the preceding stages. The extent of movement depends upon a variety of individual, group, and organizational components (Das and Teng, 2002; Gray, 1989). We will now turn to a discussion concerning the components of collaboration that influence a partnership's development through the stages.

Components of Collaboration

There are several components identified in the research as being important to the development of a successful collaboration (George & Farris, 1999; Mentzer, Foggin, & Golicic, 2000; Tas & Deng, 2002; Van De Ven, 1976). We will highlight some of the components more commonly discussed in the literature including partner characteristics, the structural makeup of collaboration, and its major functions.

Partner Characteristics

One essential component of collaboration is the makeup of the partners who join. Lei, Slocum, and Pitts (1997) discuss the importance of selecting the appropriate partners and how this process should be thought through carefully. A prospective partner should be willing to communicate, share risks, and hold the appropriate skills needed to

participate. Moreover, the prospective partner should be evaluated for his/her compatibility to fit in with the goals and objectives of the group. Although the partner may have excellent qualifications, without compatibility the working alliance may become difficult (Lei et al., 1997).

George and Farris (1999) argue that compatibility is in part based on the extent to which the partners have similar characteristics. When there is more similarity among the partners, the likelihood of success increases. In fact, Harrigan (1988) found that organizations similar in size, culture, the products they work with, and experience in collaborating, are more likely to maintain longevity when partnering. Das and Teng (2002) add that the partners must fit together from a strategic and operational point of view. In other words, each partner needs to have sufficient yet diverse resources to contribute that correspond to the group's overall goal. The resources committed to the partnership must also be suitable to the operations of the collaboration. For example, a partner may offer their facility as a meeting location, but the space may be too small to accommodate the size of the group. If a partner is unable to contribute this or any other resource, it could become problematic as other partners may come to feel a particular agency is not contributing any assets to the group. Partners seek a certain level of equitability such that if one partner shares resources, knowledge, technology, etc., it is expected that other partners will do the same.

Other essential characteristics a partner should have are an interest in actively participating with the support from upper management, a belief that the partnership's goals are achievable, and the capacity to trust. During a focus group with business organizations, an active interest in participating was identified as a central theme of

collaboration (Mentzer, Foggin, and Golicic, 2000). But the organization's leadership must also be supportive of this interest otherwise the partners are less likely to be involved regardless of their individual interest (Johnson et al., 2003). When the partners are actively engaged, more work can be accomplished towards meeting the goals of the group, and there is a vested interest to succeed as a partnership.

The level of participation may be influenced by the extent to which the partners believe that the goals of collaboration are achievable. Without this belief in the collaborative process, the group is likely to fail. According to Forger, (2001) organizations that take the "not now" approach are unlikely to join collaborations because they simply don't believe a collaborative effort can succeed. It is difficult for these organizations to envision a partnership as being able to realize its goals. Yet those who take the "real deal" approach incorporate collaboration systemically throughout their organization because they believe collaboration is a more viable mechanism to accomplish certain goals (Forger, 2001).

Another important collaborative component is the partner's ability to trust the other members. Kelly, Schaan, and Joncas, (2002) stated "...the early establishment of a trust-based relationship is a critical factor in setting up the conditions for success" (p. 12). Using an in-depth case analysis, George and Farris (1999) confirmed that trust is seen by organizations as an important factor necessary for collaboration. Faulkner (1995) asserts that trust occurs when there is adequate confidence among the members to share their knowledge and resources regardless of the fact that there may be some risk of exploitation. Without the capacity to form trust, suspicion may arise among the partners and inhibit the group from achieving its intended goals (Kelly, Schaan, & Joncas, 2002).

Structural Dimensions of Collaboration

While partner characteristics comprise one component of collaboration, there are also organizational elements to consider. Ven De Ven (1976) identified three structural components of collaborative ventures: formalization, centralization, and complexity. Together, these three components are viewed as the partnership's structural dimension. Formalization entails the extent of rules, policies, and regulations that are followed by each of the partners (Robbin, 1998). They may be highly formal or informal depending on the purpose and nature of the partnership. When the rules, policies, and regulations are vocalized or documented in writing, the partnership is considered to be more formal. Roles and functions are usually clearly defined when formality is high (Hogue, 1993).

Centralization refers to the decision-making power within the group (Ven De Ven, 1976). Most organizations fall along some level of hierarchy of authority, where those with more power are likely to be the major decision makers in the organization (Robbin, 1998). A non-hierarchical system, however, is commonly seen within collaborative ventures. The partners may function more like a board or a committee where all partners have equal authority and participate in the decision-making process (Ven De Ven, 1976). Even where there is a high level of leadership in the collaboration, decision-making usually is equally shared among the partners (Hogue, 1993). It is true that, early on, members may view any collaborative decisions as separate from the actual practices carried out within their respective organizations; as the collaboration strengthens, however, this attitude shifts to one where the partners view their collaborative decision making as having a direct effect on the operations of their own organizations (Ven De Ven, 1976).

Structural complexity refers to the number of “differentiated elements” that are incorporated into the group (Ven De Ven, 1976). The number of members that comprise the partnership, and the number of issues or tasks assumed by the group as part of its initiative are two examples of structural elements. The more elements that exist, the more complex the determination of the relationship among the partners and their specific roles and functions (Ven De Ven, 1976). It is important for the partnership to consider all three structural components. The collaboration needs to clarify the level of formality they wish to adopt, specify the manner in which decisions are to be made, and determine the level of complexity they believe is feasible to manage.

Functions of Collaboration

In every partnership there are certain functions that affect its operations. Fishman, Farrell, Allen, and Eiseman (2000) identified several functions, including strategic planning, resource acquisition and allocation, staff training, and information dissemination. One of the primary functions is strategic planning. This involves the assessment of community needs and determining how the partnership will uniquely meet those needs (2000). As part of strategic planning, goals and objectives as well as an implementation plan are formulated. Strategic planning has been identified as a “critical incident” necessary for the success of a partnership in terms of determining new ways to meet community needs (Harrison, Lynch, Rosander, and Borton, 1990, p.74). When a partnership forms, the members need to determine how they will differentiate themselves from their competitors as part of the strategic plan. In doing so, they are more inclined to feel they have a “cooperative advantage” over their competitors (Lei, Slocum, & Pitts, 1997).

Resource acquisition and allocation are two functions that address how resources are brought into the group and distributed to meet the goals of the group (Fishman et al., 2000). Typically each partner joins the collaboration with individual ways of gathering resources and allocating them within their own organizations (2000). This, however, may change as the partners become more cohesive and trusting of each other. A formal plan may be drafted outlining procedures on how the partners will bring in new resources from their own efforts and share them among one another so that there is a collective benefit. Collaborating in this way is important for the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the group (2000). The members can reduce redundancy in their own efforts to seek out resources by dividing responsibilities among the partners.

Staff training is also a function that can exist within the scope of the partnership. Generally, organizations are accustomed to training their staff separately. However, as cooperation forms between the partners, they may begin to share on many levels of training. The sharing may be as simple as the partners informing each other of upcoming trainings or as developed as the partners participating in training they organized cooperatively (Fishman et al., 2000). An advantage to this function is that partners become more aware of training opportunities available to enhance their skills as it relates to the overall goals of the partnership. Their organizations may also benefit by saving on time and money they otherwise would have spent to conduct the training for their own staff.

Lastly, dissemination of information and community awareness is another function integral to many partnerships. In a study of nonprofit agencies, Harrison et al. (1990) found that community awareness and networking were essential to the success of

collaboration. In order to sustain business, organizations routinely need to disseminate information about their services and operations to a variety of interest groups such as funding sources and other organizations (Fishman et al., 2000). Through collaboration, the members can combine their efforts to inform the community, as well as their respective organizations, about the partnership. For example, they may develop and distribute brochures about the partnership. Or each member may take turns representing the partnership at different community events. By sharing this function, each organization in the partnership can increase its visibility while achieving the goals of the group.

In summary, there are several components of collaboration identified in the literature as being important including the partner characteristics, the structural makeup of the group, and the functions of collaboration. This review clearly demonstrates the complexity of collaboration and how many factors can influence its overall success. It is important for any collaborative initiative including the CES to consider each of these components. We will now turn to a discussion about the components of the CES model, as it relates to some of these factors.

Components of the CES Model

The purpose of the CES model is to create an integrated employment-focused disability service provider network in a local community. We have developed two pilot CES projects as a way to test the model in more than one type of community setting. One project is based in a midsize city with seventeen different agencies that provide employment services to a wide range of consumers with physical, sensory, cognitive, developmental, substance abuse, and psychiatric disabilities. The second CES is in a large metropolitan area which includes seven agencies serving exclusively consumers

with psychiatric disabilities. Both projects are supported by paid coordinators who oversee the administration of the CES and communication between partner agencies. The CES model incorporates many of the components described earlier in terms of partner characteristics, structural dimensions, and functions of collaboration. We will describe some unique aspects of the CES in relation to a few of these components.

Hogue (1993) opines that it is generally better when a collaborative venture is organized through the use of written documentation or contracts. Not only does this support a more formalized entity as recommended by Ven De Ven (1976), it also requires from the partners an active commitment to the venture--which is an important component recognized by Mentzer, Foggin, and Golicic (2000). Therefore, one constituent of the CES is the Memorandum of Understanding.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlines the expectations and responsibilities of each agency, including the resources they agree to allocate to the CES. As a means of demonstrating their willing involvement in the CES, each partner agency is required to sign the MOU. The MOU also allows for an assessment of the agency's overall compatibility with the CES, a component described earlier as being essential to collaboration (George & Farris, 1999). The MOU is reviewed with each prospective partner prior to joining the CES and again jointly by all partners on an annual basis. Periodic reviews of the MOU allow for partners to discuss any issues that occurred during the preceding year and to make any changes to the activities and practices of the CES. Revisions are intended to enhance the goals and outcomes of the partnership.

The MOU describes several functions of the CES (see outline in Table 1). However, the most important function of the MOU is to create an agreement among the

partners that they will actively develop and share employer information specific to job development and job retention. For the CES this agreement translates to the function of resource allocation as described by Fishman et al. (2000) and serves as both the greatest benefit and challenge to the group. Another essential function of the CES outlined in the MOU is the active participation in training that educates the partners about innovative concepts related to job placement and job retention. According to Fishman et al. (2000), this function constitutes staff training whereby the partners collectively learn together about concepts that will improve their skills in the field.

A second component of the CES relates to the resource allocation of meeting locations, time, and materials. CES meetings are either held at a central location, or rotated between many of the partner agencies. Aside from attending meetings, the partners have also allocated time to participate in various employment events (e.g. job fairs, local conferences, etc.) as a representative of the CES. As indicated by Das and Teng (2002), sharing resources in an operational and equitable way will contribute to the establishment of trust and goal attainment within the CES. By rotating meeting locations, designating representatives at certain events, and sharing materials, the CES partners are more inclined to feel that everyone is contributing to the collaboration in a useful way.

A third component of the CES is the method by which job development is conducted by the partner agencies. During CES meetings, the partners generate a list of local employers with appropriate jobs and a plan is devised on how best to approach each employer. Certain partners agree to take the lead in making the initial contact with a specific employer. An interview with the employer is then conducted, often with two to three CES partners from different agencies. During each interview, the partners use a

standardized interviewing tool, the Employer Opportunity Survey (Gilbride, Vandergoot, Golden & Stensrud, 2006), that provides a common method to obtain employer information and has been found to facilitate effective employer relationships. At subsequent CES meetings, the partners provide a summary report to the larger group about the employer(s) they interviewed including information about job opportunities and the best way to negotiate that particular employer's hiring system. The group also agrees on a protocol for contacting the employer in the future. For example, they must decide if all contact with the employer should go through one primary CES partner or if an alternate protocol should be used to maximize a consumer's odds of obtaining a job. (See the appendix for a sample of a protocol created by one of the CES projects to handle employer contacts when a primary partner has been identified.) If the CES is able to reach the final stage of collaboration as described by Fishman et al. (2000), it is expected that this new job development approach will systematically alter the service delivery practice conducted within each partner agency.

The Employment Information Exchange System (EIES), a shared database, serves as another unique component of the CES. This database was designed to organize all employer information collected by the CES partners during job development. Basic information about the employer (i.e. contact information, types of jobs, hours, benefits, etc.), specific details on hiring procedures including the best way to approach a specific employer (i.e. by phone, fax, email, or in person), characteristics of the workplace culture, disability related issues such as accessibility, and openness to hiring and accommodating employee's with disabilities, are entered into a database. The database was created with the input of CES partners and includes information that is most

important to rehabilitation providers in a format that best meets partner agency needs. The database is on-line and password protected so that only CES partners have access. The database serves as the central resource of the CES and as a centralized way to manage employer relationships as all contacts with the employer are listed and summarized. Job leads are entered into the database, and partner agencies can search the database by type of job, employer, location and many other variables. The database serves as a forum for the CES partners to share information and build collaboration towards resolving employment issues for consumers and employers.

In sum, although traditional networking and local professional groups have been quite useful, the CES model is much more comprehensive and ambitious in scope. CES partners are expected to actively participate, share resources, and “work as one,” in developing and maintaining employer relationships. In turn, we believe there will be significant benefits to the partners as well as the employers and consumers they serve. However, collaboration is complex and challenging. In the next section we will discuss many of the benefits and challenges we have faced in instituting the CES model.

Benefits and Challenges of the CES

Benefits

The CES model provides several benefits to partner agencies, employers, and consumers. In partnership, agencies have access to many more employers than they would individually. Employers profit by having a single point of contact, and an easy method to tap into the labor supply of people with disabilities who are often qualified and

motivated workers. Consumers benefit by having access to a broader range of quality employment opportunities that should optimize the job match.

The EIES database offers advantages for all three groups. Unlike job banks found online, this database provides useful information about the employer's workplace culture in addition to details about the job. The CES partners have "insider" information unavailable to most job seekers because of their on-going relationships with employers. By sharing this information via the database, partners can quickly and efficiently evaluate if a job is appropriate for a candidate beyond job duties, and how best to approach that employer. Accounting for workplace culture enhances the possibility of achieving an appropriate fit. Consequently, consumers are likely to experience better integration into their respective workplaces, leading to increased satisfaction for both the consumer and employer.

Other, more subtle benefits of the CES model is its ability to increase the social capital of consumers and providers (Potts, 2005; Granovetter, 1994), and to help bridge structural holes between consumers and employers (Burt, 1992). Granovetter (1983, 1994) documented the importance of social networks on employment, both in terms of learning about job opportunities and obtaining a specific job. The complexity of a person's social network (i.e. their social capital) is highly related to employment success. In fact, most of the employers interfacing with the CES state that their number one recruitment tool is personal references. Many people with disabilities have limited social networks that place them at a competitive disadvantage when seeking employment (Potts, 2005). Also, many agencies do not have the time or the funds to generate or maintain a strong network of employers. By pooling the existing contacts of the entire group and

developing new, meaningful relationships with employers, the CES enhances the social capital of all the agencies, and that social capital can be used to help consumers find higher quality positions.

In addition to limited social networks, structural holes between agencies and employers also exist (Burt, 1992). Burt stated that a structural hole is a buffer where people on either side circulate information. The groups on either side of a structural hole may be aware of each other, but they rarely attend to, or have much contact with those on the other side. The CES can help bridge this structural hole by fostering communication between employers, agencies, and consumers. Burt asserted that brokering the flow of information between sides of a structural hole can dramatically increase social capital. Given that employers have the jobs, the primary responsibility for bridging this gap rests with the rehabilitation community.

Challenges

As indicated above, collaboration is not easy to achieve. As noted by Gray (1989), “overcoming the barriers created by different institutional cultures is often a formidable task” (p. 9). Even when organizations recognize the benefits of participating in a partnership to meet shared goals, many factors can impede the consortium. Harrison, Lynch, Rosander, and Borton (1990), identified fourteen common barriers to collaboration that included competitiveness, parochial interests, lack of skill in coordinating, concerns about client confidentiality, resistance to change, inadequate knowledge about other agencies, negative attitudes, and little consideration of political bases. In this section we will outline key challenges that we have encountered in this CES project and identify strategies to overcome these barriers.

Two of the most prominent issues addressed in the implementation of this CES model are territoriality and trust. Sharing established or newly developed employer contacts is both a benefit and hindrance to the CES model. Many of the CES partners perceive themselves as competitors, both for referrals, and placements. For example, the supervisor at one CES agency compared people from agencies to “vultures” who are ready to swoop down on any possible job lead. CES partners often hesitate to share employer contacts with other agencies for fear that they will lose job opportunities for their existing or future consumers, or that the other agency will send an inappropriate job candidate, which might then damage a relationship with an employer and make employers resistant to hiring individuals with disabilities in the future.

Our solution to address territoriality has been to emphasize contacting “new” employers. During CES meetings, partners target only employers with which no partner agency has an existing relationship. Thus, all CES partners gain by accessing new labor markets while maintaining existing employer relationships. This focus on contacting “new” employers has the added benefit of building rapport among the group and increasing group success as these employers are often ones that agencies have had limited or no success in contacting. In addition, the group builds trust by establishing their own set of “rules” and parameters--such as contacting the agency that has the relationship with the employer prior to contacting the employer. By pooling strategies, and approaching these employers as a group, the CES has the resources to bridge structural holes more effectively. Working together to develop strategies to approach new employers also helps to develop trust between CES partners.

As previously indicated, developing trust is a key step in the early development of successful collaboration. A key tactic we have used to establish trust is to hold structured meetings on a regular basis. During CES meetings, partner agencies have the opportunity to recognize their shared values, goals and frustrations. Some of these collective frustrations include the changing demands of a global workforce, the increased expectations for accountability and outcomes from most funders, and the many assorted demands incumbent upon all agencies. Identifying the means to address these frustrations through shared decision making in an environment of equality and respect helps to build trust. Now in its second year, the CES has seen steady growth in the establishment of trusting relationships between those agencies committed to long term participation in it.

Although regularly scheduled meetings are used to help build trust, these meetings also present challenges. Meeting attendance among certain partner agencies is inconsistent. Moreover, staff members at some agencies share the responsibility of attending meetings. While rotating staff participation among agencies may increase involvement, it may also interfere with group continuity. Further, some staff members that attend meetings fail to communicate CES activities with others from their agencies. As a result, detailed minutes and follow-up emails clarifying agreements and responsibilities keep all agency participants aware of activities but require the time of the CES coordinator.

Another way to foster trust is to engage in activities that require communication outside the CES meetings, such as having groups collaborate to create a brochure or to generate ideas about practices. While it is difficult to engage every partner, such efforts

encourage communication. Ideally, each agency will commit to a clear procedure to ensure their consistent participation.

A related challenge is follow-through or accountability. Partner agencies may agree to contact a specific company or coordinate training activities; however, there is no assurance that they will complete the task. As a result, other partners become reluctant to commit their time and energy, especially if they have historically been highly involved with CES activities. As participation in the CES is voluntary, no explicit sanctions or consequences for lack of participation exist. In the end, however, if a partner agency continually fails to participate in meetings or follow through on commitments, the active partners may decide to expel the inactive partner. Identifying ways to promote commitment is important in order to avoid this situation. Having a formal agenda that summarizes partners' activities may create peer pressure for completion of tasks. Having agencies pair-up on tasks, and employing cross-agency sub-committees with an identifiable lead facilitator, also encourages accountability.

In addition to commitment, change also poses a challenge. While individuals may acknowledge that changing practices may be useful, any change is often met with resistance as individuals prefer to practice as they have always practiced. (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1999). The challenge of the CES model is to keep the collaborative momentum moving so that the new practices are solidified and become common practice. While this process can take years, it is expedited once partners experience the positive effects and benefits of the new practices.

System change is a long-term goal of the CES. Along with enhancing collaboration, the current projects are also incorporating a demand side approach to

employer development--such as developing relationships with employers to assist them in becoming more “user-friendly” and open to workers with disabilities. (Gilbride & Stensrud, 1992). For most partner agencies, the demand side model is a shift from their normal practices. While employer consulting is often discussed in the literature as a vital component of job placement, (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1994; Gilbride & Stensrud, 2003; Vandergoot, 1987) many providers lack the skill to help employers become more open and accommodating to people with disabilities. A demand side approach requires placement providers to have a deep understanding of the employer’s perspective and needs. The CES model attempts to help providers develop this knowledge.

While attention to consumers is appropriate and essential, the CES model incorporates equal attention to the employer. The model attempts to address the issue, both by direct training of staff during CES meetings, and peer-training in which all partners benefit from each others’ employer knowledge and experience. This “pooled wisdom” results in a more comprehensive and complex understanding of employers

Summary

Placement of people with disabilities remains challenging due to global competition, the need for employees who can multi-task, and the tendency for many employers to turn to temporary or other employment agencies to fill their entry-level positions. The CES provides a means for meeting the needs of businesses and can help community agencies meet challenges by establishing a collaborative framework that can stay abreast of both the local labor market and employment trends, and share limited resources to the benefit of all. While replication of the model in different communities

will undoubtedly result in modifications and changes, we have outlined five key elements that should be considered when implementing the CES model.

1. Identification of key players in the community and role definition

As previously mentioned, an essential component of collaboration is the compatibility and commitment of the partners. The first step in the creation of the CES project was identifying community agencies with a vocational rehabilitation program that serviced the targeted consumer group. This step also included identifying the community agencies interested in participating and those essential for success. Project leaders also targeted the state-supported vocational rehabilitation agencies to inform them of the project and to invite their participation. It is important to invite all eligible agencies to join the CES to create a sense of community-wide inclusion.

After identifying the key players, the next essential step is role definition. Each partner must understand the goals and expectations of the CES. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is an effective tool to define roles because it formally outlines member responsibilities and requires a signature to confirm commitment to the project. After reviewing the MOU, some agencies may decide not to participate, thus the remaining agencies will be committed and supportive of the project.

2. Central coordinator and resource support from agencies

One key component of the CES pilot projects thus far is the central coordinator whose sole responsibility is oversight of the CES. This is one element that differentiates the CES from other community collaborations and enhances its success, as consortiums without a coordinator do not have staff available to support only the consortium. The CES project coordinators are not employees of any specific agency, but are hired to

facilitate the collaboration and are charged with tasks such as organizing and facilitating meetings and special events as well as maintaining detailed records of CES progress. In addition, they continuously reach out to member agencies to address any needs or concerns they have and foster communication between agencies. Project coordinators also monitor data collection. Overall, the coordinators support the objectives and goals of the group. In order to sustain the CES upon completion of the grant, and to start consortiums in other areas, other means need to be identified to replace the activities of the coordinator. Some options include requesting support from the state vocational rehabilitation office, obtaining support through grants or via pooling financial resources from member agencies.

3. Commitment of time and to system change

Collaborations start slowly and require time to build trust among partners. The partner agencies in the CES pilot projects spent approximately one year establishing trust through meetings, discussions, and rapport building. Furthermore, the CES needed time to experience the benefits of the employer focused demand-side placement model. This new model and framework for information sharing is an unconventional practice, thus a consortium needs time to establish commitment, and partner agencies should expect to make an initial commitment of two to three years.

4. Consideration of the agencies that make up the community

Every community has a distinctive culture and existing systems that have evolved over years of providing rehabilitation services. When implementing a new project, CES leaders need to be aware of, and sensitive to, these traditions and practices. Examples of such traditions include political culture or history of interactions with agencies and the

community. Forcing a new model on a community is usually not effective, thus agencies should be encouraged to be part of the development of the model and to grow with the consortium.

The communication and the decision making process becomes vital so all partners believe that they have input into the activities and the direction of the CES. This also ensures that the project moves at the pace of the group that parallels change in the community. As summarized above, research suggests that collaborative decision-making and strategic planning are essential for the success of the CES. In the current project, the coordinators are viewed as facilitators of group decisions, which increases their belief that they can impact the fate of the group (Swigger, Alpaslan, Brazile, & Monticino, 2004).

5. Implementing a formal procedure to track the effectiveness of the collaboration

Evaluating the actual and perceived level of collaboration throughout the course of the project is recommended. The CES pilot projects discussed in this article use the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory (Mattessich, Murray-Close, Monsey 2001) as a means of evaluating the level of collaboration. If administered periodically, the Inventory rates key components of collaboration, such as communication and process. In addition, sharing these results provides members with an objective way to assess their level of progress, and provides direction for improvement. Tracking specific activities of the CES--such as contacts with employers, contacts among group members, and number of individuals placed into employment--is also necessary to determine efficacy of the project.

Regardless of how the CES is implemented, formal evaluation of the collaboration is vital for two reasons. First, the results serve as a guide for the future and an opportunity to overcome challenges. For instance, the group has an understanding of their baseline or level of collaboration at the start of the project, and has identifiable weaknesses that can be improved. Second, as evidence-based practice becomes emphasized in the fields of research, public policy, and program development, empirical validation of a program is necessary. The evaluation findings demonstrate the success of the collaboration to stakeholders and those who provide funding. As a result, conducting research and gathering data throughout the process of the CES development is necessary to document its efficacy and further enable participants to understand how the CES has impacted their practices and benefited them.

In sum, while placing individuals with disabilities into high quality jobs in which they experience success and satisfaction is difficult, practices among vocational agencies can enhance outcomes. This article has presented an innovative approach to improve the employment outcomes of people with disabilities by developing a highly structured collaboration between providers in a local community. The CES model is designed to increase job opportunities for consumers by pooling the social capital of all the partner agencies, using the combined knowledge and skills of the partners to bridge structural holes between consumers and employers. Operational collaboration is not quick or easy. Communities interested in trying this approach need to seriously examine their willingness to commit the time and resources necessary to build both the internal trust, and the partnerships with employers, that are necessary to broaden employment opportunities for consumers.

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Table 1
Components of Memorandum of Understanding

1. Participate in biweekly (two times per month) meetings for direct service staff and quarterly planning meetings with the CES

At least one member of the partner agency will be actively involved in all the CES placement and employer development activities, planning sessions and meetings. The specific amount of contact between the agency and the CES will vary depending on the number of placement ready consumers.

2. Participate in training workshops

Placement personnel from each agency participate in training. Training topics and formats are developed based on the needs of the direct service staff. Some training topics/sessions may be incorporated into the biweekly meetings

3. Provide employer information for the CES database and coordinate employer contacts with CES partners and staff

Agency staff members will work closely with the CES to contact, track and manage employer relationships. The policies and procedures for the database and employer contacts will be determined by the group (the CES partner agencies). Changes to the policies and procedures will be made as needed.

4. Provide consulting services to employers, both pre and post placement

Partners will work with CES staff to provide a variety of disability-related personnel consulting services to the CES employer network, both to increase the openness of the employer to hiring and accommodating workers with disabilities, and to enhance the success of consumers after placement.

5. Provide material support to the CES (i.e. space for meetings, etc.)

To the extent that partner agencies benefits from CES staff and resources we could like in-kind support.

6. Participate in collaborative skills training projects with other agencies and their consumers

The CES will provide opportunities for agency staff and their consumers to interact with fellow CES member agencies and to participate in skill building projects designed for consumers

Appendix

CES Protocol for Employer Contact

The following is a list of rules which will be implemented and followed by each CES partner to ensure that all members are receiving fair access to job openings.

Existing Employers

1. Any employer who has developed a relationship with an agency will contact the agency directly to let them know they have an available position. This agency, defined as the Primary Agency, will have the first opportunity to place a consumer into the job.
2. The Primary Agency will have three days to respond to the position by either filling the job or having a consumer scheduled for an interview. If the Primary Agency does not respond within the specified timeframe, the job lead will open up to all CES partners who will have three days to respond. If none of the partners respond to the posting, the lead will automatically be opened to other community rehabilitation agencies outside of the CES.
3. In the event the database has not yet been created, all partners are asked to respond to the project coordinators to notify them that they can not fill the position. This notification will allow the project coordinators to move the job lead to the next level in order to ascertain the position is filled. This will enable us to meet employer demands, thus maintaining and strengthening our relationship with them.

New Employers

1. In the event that an employer contacts the CES about an available position, the position will be posted on the database for any partner to reply.
2. Any partner with a potential candidate needs to notify the CES project coordinators within three days that they have someone who is scheduled for an interview or has been hired for the position.
3. If no one contacts the project coordinators within three days, the position will be made available to other community rehabilitation agencies.
4. E-mailing or faxing a consumer's résumé to the project coordinators is permitted but not necessary. You may send the resume directly to the employer who has the job opening. However, if you wish for the project coordinators to send his/her resume to the employer she/he will need to sign a release for the purposes of consumer confidentiality.

It is necessary that we all abide by such rules and attempt to work to these standards so that we can strengthen our partnership and build lasting relationships with employers by meeting their demands. In addition, it will enable us as a group to assist those who are ready for employment in finding positions that meet their needs.