

Holding Engaging Conversations About Work

Interviewer Companion Guide

Minnesota Department of Human Services

2016 Informed Choice for Employment

Despite what many of us have heard, work really can be an option for people with disabilities. And it doesn't mean they have to lose their benefits.

As professionals, we know the people we work with and their capabilities, and we may believe that a disability and its related circumstances preclude the possibility of regular employment. However, there are many reasons to explore the employment path for each and every one of the people we interview. The advantages to the people with disabilities and their families, to our programs, and to our communities are real and well proven.

Here's a story you may know well. Mary tells you that she has had a disability all of her life and has never worked. She tells you she didn't think work was an option – because of things her mom and others have always told her.

Mary tells you that, even if she could work, there are other challenges. Her greatest concern is that working could jeopardize her benefits. Plus she is not sure how many hours she can work in a week, and doesn't know how she would get to and from a job.

These are some of the common concerns about work, and they are very understandable. Too often, they may be assumptions that we have accepted because testing them may be difficult and risky.

The fact is, given the right information and supports, people with disabilities can work. And people with disabilities who work typically report that they do better mentally, emotionally, physically, and financially.

The key to success is to start with optimism -- assume people want to and can work. Otherwise, you may be inadvertently shutting the door or helping to keep it shut.

Always remember, the door may not be locked. It may just be stuck...

Regardless, you can help if you keep in mind that what is on the other side is worth getting to... and with the right tools and help, the door to employment can open.

So how can we get more people interested in exploring work options?

The first step may be to shift our own thinking, and to help shift the way the people we work with think about employment.

We need to move the common perception that...

“Work is not an option for people with disabilities”

To

“Work can be an option for people with disabilities.”

As assessors and service providers, we typically think in terms of service delivery. We think about how we can ensure the person is receiving the right services. We may think of employment as an adjunct service – an add-on to a person’s situation.

For people without disabilities, work is seen as a regular part of life. It is something that molds their identity, routine, stability, purpose, and sense of control.

For people who have a disability, employment is equally important. If we learn to think about employment as an option, we can begin to help others see the possibility.

People with disabilities report many advantages from working. There are financial advantages, but there are other important positive outcomes.

Here is what some people have said about what work has meant to them:

- I was so lonely before. Since I started working at the sandwich shop, I have made some friends and I just, well, I just have more energy it seems.
- I like having the routine and now I can pay bills that I used to worry about all the time.
- It feels really good to get that paycheck and some appreciation.
- Now when I meet someone and they ask me what I do, I have something to say. I am an inventory specialist at the mall. I’m pretty proud of that.
- I met someone at my job who has taught me how to fix a broken lamp.
- When I go to work, I have people who share my interests – we’re watching the same shows, reading some of the same books. It’s really good to have someone to talk with about that stuff.
- A lady at my job gave me some great ideas for decorating my living room. And I’ve been sharing some recipes with her.
- My brother says he can’t believe how much healthier and happier I seem lately, since I started working.
- I don’t want to do this forever, but I don’t have to. I’m learning some things I didn’t know I could do, and it’ll lead to other things I’m sure.
- I’m so glad to be making some money of my own. It makes me feel a little stronger – like I’m contributing something to the family.

Working means:

- ✓ More income
- ✓ Gain independence
- ✓ Improve health
- ✓ Learn new skills
- ✓ Meet new people

There is a great deal of research data to support the benefits of employment.

For example, noted researcher Robert Drake, M.D., said that ““Nothing that I have studied has the same kind of impact on people that employment does. Medication, case management, and psychotherapies tend to produce a small impact on people’s overall adjustment. But the differences are often striking and dramatic with employment.”

And according to Dr. Gary Bond, “Among people with psychiatric disabilities, there is no research evidence that anything adverse happens to those who are employed – there is no increase in symptoms or hospitalizations.”

In addition to believing work is possible, we can also think about work in new and creative ways. It can even include self-employment or starting a business.

One of the major barriers to seeking employment is, of course, the benefits question. There is a very common perception that if you receive public benefits, working could jeopardize those benefits.

Even if we believe people can work and still receive benefits, the mix of benefits rules is complicated, and frequently daunting to us and to the people we serve.

But we need to realize--and help others understand--that it can very often be worthwhile to check into it. And there are resources that can help.

The fact is, you can take on paid employment, retain benefits, and come out ahead financially.

Factors that Point to Employment Interests and Needs

While you are conducting the general phase of the interview, you may hear comments that may indicate the person could benefit from employment. These comments can help open the discussion and potentially trigger new or renewed interest.

“I can’t afford health care costs.”

“I’m bored and lonely”.

“I’d like to have my own place.” I’m tired of having everything done for me...”

Here are some examples:

Interviewer: Martin, what are some of the things that you have done in the past that make you or your family proud?

Martin: I had a project when I was in school where we took care of some rescued animals who had been hurt. I had a rabbit I named Jake. His paw was cut. I fed him, made sure he had enough to drink. I cleaned out his cage. That was important because I had to handle him very carefully so he didn't get scared. Anyway, he got better and I got an A. I really missed him after we let him go – but I felt great knowing he could go back to living in the woods.

During your conversation, you've learned that Martin is typically a bit lonely and he doesn't feel much self-worth.

However, from this response, you can tell that Martin found a sense of purpose, personal pride, and satisfaction when taking care of an animal, and getting recognized for his success.

Martin has never had a job, but it's clear he has some skills and interests that might translate well to a work environment where he can get that sense of personal contribution, as well as some companionship.

Martin's challenges include:

- Loneliness
- Low self-esteem

Martin's experience includes:

- Satisfaction with nurturing/care taking
- A positive outcome based on his efforts
- A love of animals
- Positive feedback / reward

Employment as a solution?

How can his response to this question about accomplishments help with the employment conversation? Let's listen in again.

Interviewer: Sounds like you really like animals and are pretty good with them. Did you know there are jobs where you can help take care of animals and you can even get paid to do it?

Here the assessor is opening the topic, using Martin's past positive experience to help him imagine himself in a positive employment role. The general section of the assessment asks personal history questions that explore work, volunteer, and learning experiences.

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Personal history questions

- Work
- Volunteer experience
- Education

What worked well? What didn't?

In a section about current circumstances, there are questions that ask about personal preferences, strengths, social needs, and responsibilities or obligations.

Personal preference questions

I like _____.

I wish _____.

I don't like it when _____.

I'm really good at _____.

I want to spend time with _____.

I am responsible for _____.

Interviewer: What things do you try to make sure are in your life every day? What kinds of things do you like to do? Do you have hobbies? Do you like a lot of structure in your day? What things are you good at? Please tell me about your friends / family. Who spends time with you and helps you out? Is there someone that you need to take care of?

Martin: I get bored, so I try to go out of the house every day. That's hard to do in the winter though. I like to find new people to talk to when I can... I like feeding the birds down at the park. Gets me out of the house, the birds know me, and sometimes I talk to Joe; he feeds the birds sometimes too... I like to have breakfast by 8 every day, and I like to do some things in order – it's just easier that way. But some things I don't mind skipping now and then, or doing them after mom comes home so she can help me and we can talk. She has to work and we don't get much time to talk... My brothers and sisters are all older and live somewhere else, so it's just me and mom. She needs me to keep things cleaned up around the house. I am pretty good at keeping things neat. I am also never late – not when it's up to me.

The answers can tell you something about what interests the person, and what kind of daily needs and wants they may have that may or may not be met. You can use this information to think about how an employment environment may provide solutions.

The assessment includes a section about life satisfaction.

Interviewer: Do you like where you live? Do you like how you spend a typical weekday? Do you get to meet new people as much as you would like? Are there things you used to do that you enjoyed, but can't do any more?

Martin: I like living with my mom, but if I could ever afford it, I want to live on my own someday. A lot of days I get bored and wish there was more to do. I don't have enough people to talk to now that I'm out of school.

Comments about needing more money can often lead to employment discussions. Dissatisfaction with one's routine or social circumstances can also let you know that the person may be open to exploring employment.

There are a number of other sections that directly and indirectly address employment:

Section	Description	Questions
Service-related Rights and Choices	The section on service-related rights and choices includes a direct question about work and benefits.	Are you aware that you can work and keep your benefits?
Future Planning	The section on future planning explores the person's vision.	What would your best future look like? Where would you live, what would you do with your time...?
Loss	The section on loss does not directly address employment, but it may be useful to note whether the person has lost a job, or once had a job that they miss.	Laid off or let go? Job ended? Job that person can no longer perform?
Safety	The section on safety also includes a question about whether the person has been in an unsafe situation because of lack of money.	This question can elicit responses that let you know that the person needs additional income and better financial security that employment may provide.

These general questions, some of which are directly about employment and some not, can point to employment as a solution. If you keep in mind that employment may be an option for each person you interview, you can listen for these critical clues.

Common Questions and Concerns

Let's look at some common questions and perceptions about working and benefits, and how you might address them.

Client's Worry	Your Options
If I work I will lose my health care coverage.	There are work incentives that help people maintain or access needed health care benefits while working. Lots of people work and keep their medical benefits.
If I work I will be worse off financially.	There are ways to be better off financially by working. While it is true that some costs may go up (like housing), many people earn enough money to be better off. And there are tools to show how that's possible.
It's too risky to work. I might fail.	There are work incentives to try working to see how it goes. There are resources to help people find and keep a job.

Part of your role is to answer employment questions that come up. Your attitude and answers to questions are important to:

- Conveying the message that employment may be an option for everyone,
- Advocating for getting the right information to make more informed choices,
- Suggesting referrals to resources and information that can help the process.