

Utilizing Natural Supports in Transition and Competitive Integrated Employment

Support networks within workplaces vary, but a variety of “natural” supports are common and critical to employee success. These supports help employees to receive assistance, build relationships, and experience success. For example, it is common for one or more co-workers to show new employees around and to serve as contacts when employees have questions or concerns. We refer to these as natural supports.

Despite their physical presence in community work situations, many individuals with disabilities remain isolated in their jobs, with little opportunity to interact and develop supportive relationships with co-workers. As students prepare for their transition from school to work and adult life, it is important to identify and facilitate the use of natural supports. Helping students to use natural supports at work strengthens their employment experiences and assists in job retention.

What are Natural Supports?

The term "natural supports" in relation to work is defined as any assistance, relationships, strategies, and interactions that:

- allow a person to secure, maintain, and advance in a community job of their choosing;
- correspond to the typical work routines and social actions of other employees; and
- enhance the individual's work and nonwork inclusion among his/her coworkers and other members of the community (Murphy, Rogan, et al, 1993).

This definition emphasizes support that adheres to typical routines, relationships, and rhythms of a particular workplace. Natural supports can involve people, procedures, customs, tools, and benefits that are typically available in the workplace and include, but are not limited to:

- Job/task support (e.g., mentoring, coaching, team collaboration)
- Social/emotional support and relationships on and off the job (e.g., positive social interactions; peer support networks; open communication)
- Personal care assistance
- Support with work-related activities (e.g., banking, transportation)
- Technological support
- Flexible work arrangements or telework

- Environmental modifications
- Ergonomic engineering
- Compensatory strategies
- Instructional techniques

Therefore, natural support includes relationships and interactions with others, both on and off the job site. As noted above, support may come from family, friends, acquaintances, workplace personnel, assistive technology, and/or other supportive strategies (e.g., visual and auditory cues) that increase employee independence and success.

There are many examples of how students can be helped. For example, bus drivers could ensure that an individual gets off at the right stop. A co-worker might accompany an employee to the lunchroom to help them get their lunch and socialize with other co-workers. A neighbor may provide a ride to and from work. The importance of these relationships cannot be overstated.

Strategies to Facilitate Natural Supports

During the transition process, educators should work with students, families, and adult service providers to plan for and facilitate natural supports. Person-centered planning strategies like the LifeCourse Framework help discover existing or potential individuals or groups who can provide support. Leveraging the existing networks in a student's life can enhance a young person's employment and community life success. Ideally, the need for natural supports will diminish over time as employees with disabilities become more independent.

As with all parts of the transition process, early planning is key. The following steps can help ensure that a person with a disability will be fully integrated in the workplace:

- 1. Training and Support:** Create the expectation throughout the job development process that the employer and/or co-workers will provide training and support for the individual with a disability, as they would with any other employee.
- 2. Role of the Employment Specialist:** Explain the role of the Employment Specialist or support staff to the employer. These individuals are there to supplement, not substitute for the supports available within the workplace. Educate the employer on natural supports and their role in the employee's success.
- 3. Individualized Support Needs:** Discuss the student's specific support needs and provide relevant information, such as the most effective ways to communicate with the employee or the types of technology that will be used.

4. **Social Inclusion:** Talk to the employer about how crucial social inclusion is for the employee's long-term success. Design the job so that the worker has regular contact and interaction with coworkers and has the same break times, mealtimes, etc.
5. **Physical Integration:** Ensure that the area where the person with a disability will be working is physically near co-workers.

Resources

- ✓ Bose, J. (July 2015). The Importance of Natural Supports. Tools for Inclusion, Issue 49. Institute for Community Inclusion / UMass Boston -ThinkWork!
<https://www.thinkwork.org/importance-natural-supports>
- ✓ Employment Natural Supports: What are they and why are they important for employees with autism? (March 29, 2024). <https://autismsociety.org/employment-natural-supports-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-for-employees-with-autism/>
- ✓ Natural Supports Improve Every Area of Quality of Life (July 25, 2023). The Council on Quality & Leadership: <https://www.c-q-l.org/resources/articles/natural-supports-improve-every-area-of-quality-of-life/>
- ✓ Stephen Murphy, S., Rogan, P., Olney, M., Sures, M., Dague, B., and Kalina, N. (July 1993). Developing natural supports in the workplace: A manual for practitioners. Center on Human Policy, Syracuse University.
- ✓ The Value of Natural Supports. Virginia Commonwealth University Partnership for People with Disabilities: <https://dsporientation.partnership.vcu.edu/section-i/the-value-of-natural-supports/>
- ✓ Webinar: Understanding Natural Supports in Diverse Adults with IDD (November 12, 2024). American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: <https://www.aaidd.org/education/webinars/register-for-upcoming-webinars/2024/11/12/default-calendar/understanding-natural-supports-in-diverse-adults-with-idd>

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