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*The stories of real people
and employment*

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A. Introduction, History and Methodology

Background: Connect-Ability

Funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant, now known as “Connect-Ability,” was awarded to the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) in 2006. The grant is designed to enhance and support competitive employment for people with disabilities. The Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment Final Report, published by the University of Connecticut Health Center, Center on Aging, describes the purpose of the grant:

The grant is intended to facilitate enhancements to the state Medicaid program and services, to promote linkages between Medicaid and other employment-related service agencies and to develop a comprehensive system of employment supports for people with disabilities (Robison, Gruman, Porter, Kellett & Reed, 2006, p. i).

Connect-Ability included, as one of its first components, a needs assessment survey sent out to people with disabilities throughout the state of Connecticut. Respondents included Connecticut citizens with disabilities who were participating in any of the Medicaid waiver programs designated for people with disabilities, the Medicaid Buy-In program, and some individuals who were participating in the Connecticut Benefit Offset Demonstration project.¹ Individuals who completed the survey fell into three classifications: those currently working, those who had worked in the past, and those who had never worked. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative (open-ended) questions about their experiences, expectations and needs regarding work and personal assistance. In addition, separate surveys were sent to employers throughout the state to obtain information regarding their attitudes and practices with regard to hiring people with disabilities.

The results of the Connecticut citizen survey, in addition to providing information about living situation, ratings of overall health, transportation and neighborhoods, yielded a sequence of challenges or barriers to working as expressed in an open-ended question. The most frequently mentioned barriers or challenges faced by workers included physical health problems or physical disability; transportation; lack of personal assistance either at work or at home; intellectual or cognitive disability; emotional difficulties or mental illness; work place accommodations; training or education; assistance to find a job; lack of jobs with benefits or good pay; concerns about loss of benefits; and older age (Robison, et al., 2006).

In addition to the survey, more complex, qualitative information was derived from focus group and key informant interviews. Representing the voices of 320 stakeholders, including people with disabilities, family members, service providers, state agencies, and employers, these in-depth interviews revealed several themes. One of the predominant themes was the fact that many Connecticut residents with disabilities are still struggling to gain employment. Another theme was the perception that people with disabilities are still experiencing discrimination in many employment practices.

¹The Benefit Offset Demonstration Project is a pilot program sponsored by the Social Security Administration (SSA) that affords people who are receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) the opportunity to earn more than the maximum amount usually allowed for those receiving SSDI without losing all of their cash benefits.

Results of the surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews provided significant information about the employment barriers and challenges faced by people with disabilities. The Connect-Ability team sought to enhance that information with more in-depth insight into the journeys of individuals, over time, in their struggles to find meaningful, competitive employment. The “Pathways to Success” project was initiated in early 2008 to follow a group of individuals with disabilities through periodic in-person interviews in which they share their employment stories, including their aspirations, successes and failures. This qualitative research using in-depth interviews was designed as a way of describing the personal experiences of people with disabilities in their pursuit of employment.

Interview participants for the Pathways project were recruited from the pool of callers to Connect-Ability’s toll-free assistance number, which was set up to provide a common point of information for both employers and job seekers. Several hundred calls were made to the toll free number as a result of Connect-Ability’s wide-ranging public information campaign. The calls came overwhelmingly from people with disabilities seeking competitive employment.

Follow-up calls were made by a researcher associated with the University of Connecticut Health Center (UCHC), Center on Aging to 121 of the several hundred inquirers who called the number during the period from July of 2007 to May of 2008. Although the primary purpose of the follow-up calls was for quality management, (respondents were asked several questions about their experiences when they called the Connect-Ability toll free number), one question was designed to recruit individual callers who might be willing to participate in the Pathways study.

As of December 2008, nineteen men and women had agreed to participate in an initial interview and follow-up interviews at regular six-month intervals. Since participants were chosen on the basis of their willingness to participate, the sample is not representative of those who called in; neither is it representative of people with disabilities who have a desire to work. The majority of respondents were men (n=15) and the respondents represent a wide variety of disabilities including back injuries, stroke, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairments, cognitive impairments, and mental illness. In two cases, a proxy related to that person answered the questions. In another case, both the participant and his mother contributed to the interview. The ages of the sample group ranged from 21 to 61. Demographic information for the group of nineteen interviewees is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information on participants

Type of disability	N (%)	Age	N (%)	Working status	N (%)	Gender	n (%)
Physical	14 (74)	21-30	3 (16)	Full time	2 (11)	Male	15 (79)
Mental	1 (5)	31-40	4 (21)	Part time	1 (5)	Female	4 (21)
Cognitive	1 (5)	41-50	7 (37)	Not working	13 (69)		
Vision	3 (16)	51-60	4 (21)	Self-employed	3 (16)		
		Over 60	1 (5)				

Interview tools and process

Information obtained during these interviews was drawn from a guided interview (Appendix A). Members of the Connect-Ability Steering Committee had significant input into the development of the survey along with the research evaluation team at the UCHC Center on Aging. The final interview guide was approved by the UCHC Institutional Review Board. The interview assesses the current employment status of each person; satisfaction with services rendered by private and public agencies; and barriers encountered in the search for employment, such as transportation, attitudes or biases, accessibility or lack of accommodations.

At the time the participant agreed to be part of the research, a date and time were set to conduct the initial interview. The majority of the interviews took place in the person's home, with the exception of one participant who was homeless. His interview was conducted in a quiet corner of a local diner. In each case, participants were reminded of the confidentiality of the information that they were about to disclose. The interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. Finally, each person agreed to follow-up interviews at six month intervals for the duration of the study. This 2008 report is based on the 19 initial interviews conducted through December 2008. During 2009, additional interviewees are being added to obtain a more diversified sample.

Analysis

All of the transcripts were entered into Atlas.ti.5.0. This program is designed exclusively for qualitative (open-ended responses) information. Content from each open-ended question was analyzed using standard qualitative analysis techniques (McCracken, 1988). Transcripts were analyzed line by line in order to identify and interpret each individual's responses. Major concepts or areas of interest supported by direct quotations were organized into common themes using the constant comparative technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additional themes were included until no new topics were identified. Like statements were then explored and compared to refine each theme and ensure a fuller understanding of each.

B. Themes

Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts identified four major themes, each of which had several sub-themes. The major theme areas represented were:

- employment related issues (including employment status, aspirations of participants, finding a job, problems at the job caused by the disability and the interview process itself);
- external sources providing help (including supports, both positive and negative experiences, and thoughts regarding the Connect-Ability toll free number);
- barriers (including transportation, accessibility, need for accommodations, additional training and assistive technology, benefits, and employer perceptions); and
- attitudes (such as having a positive attitude during interviews, the supportive attitudes of families, and negative attitudes).

Employment related issues

Employment related issues naturally constituted one of the major themes emerging from interviews with this group of individuals, since the emphasis of Connect-Ability is to help

individuals with disabilities find meaningful employment. The content of the ad campaign to promote Connect-Ability featured individuals with various disabilities working successfully at competitive jobs. Many of the interviewees saw these ads as inspiring and wanted to pursue similar avenues to employment. Each participant had aspirations and dreams about being employed, and each one had different approaches to finding a job. Some had been able to find jobs in the past, but found that their disability interfered with their ability to maintain that position. Still others felt that the interview process was, in itself, a barrier to their employability.

Employment status

The majority (13) of the people interviewed were unemployed at the time of the interview. Two people were employed full time, three were self-employed and one had two part-time jobs. Two men who were self-employed at the time they called expressed interest in learning about other job options since they believed their disability was making it more difficult to continue in their present full-time career. The other person who was self-employed wanted to find something else because his business was not as lucrative now as it had been. The person who was working two part time jobs was looking for a more permanent full-time position. Two other men, employed full-time at the time of their interview, obtained their jobs on their own after their initial call to the toll free number. Another participant was a student who was interested in transitioning to a job.

Employment aspirations

Most of the participants indicated a desire to work and a work ethic that precludes any dependence on benefits or assistance from the government. One respondent who was working stated,

I was brought up watching my father and my mother work all the time so ... that is just the way I do it. It doesn't matter how many hours it is, or, you know, from 40 to 90, it doesn't matter. I will just keep working ...

Others who were struggling to find work, expressed feelings of insufficiency or failure, not wanting to have to resort to accepting disability benefits. In fact, several individuals who were trying to find employment expressed feelings that they would rather be working than having to accept disability benefits.

Twenty-eight years of working. I just, you know, I hate taking any money.

I would rather be out working than collecting benefits.

One man who recently acquired a disability wanted to find some kind of work and expressed his frustration with the system. He was told that in order to qualify for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) he could not even entertain the idea of getting a job.

I think that even if you are filing for Social Security Disability, if you have the capacity or ability to possibly get some part time work rather than waiting for Social Security Disability to come through, because I have heard it can take up to two years, you just sitting at home waiting. I mean why not, if you want to, try to be part of society again and helpful... why not try to get back into it and, if it still falls within the parameters of you know the money caps and the time allowed to work, then why not be able to do that?

One individual with a disability who was also homeless had a negative view about finding a job. Because of his disability, he felt that he could not find any kind of work.

I'm on medical disability- I am on disability for a reason. I have severe traumatic injuries and I really can't work.

Finding a job

There were a few individuals who were, at the time of the interview, just being introduced to agencies such as the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) after having contacted the Connect-Ability toll free number. Some were not previously aware of agencies like BRS and were pursuing employment in traditional ways. The individual who was homeless reported:

As far as finding work, no. I read the paper just to see what's available.

One of the women, a mother of two young children, expressed her frustration with the process of trying to find a job. She said,

It's difficult in the sense that I have to leave ... my home because I don't have any internet access. So I have to go to the Department of Labor, use their computers over there to try to find out places where I can apply. There are usually none in Hartford, so I would have to get on a bus and ride it for blocks.

Another woman who had a stroke and uses a wheelchair was experiencing frustration at the responses she got from prospective employers. She had had several interviews and has extensive experience in her field, but she said,

Well, actually the employers I met with they are like, "Oh, we are looking for someone with more experience or less experience", usually it has been someone with less years. I have almost 20 years of experience in IT. I know I am going to have to take a lower level job to get back into the market, but I already know that I can't jump back in at the level I was at before. I am prepared to do that.

One man in his early 50s had been working two part time janitorial jobs. He has a visual impairment and he had been trying to find something else since he previously had 25 years of experience. He said,

I have a hard time finding anybody that will interview me even finding jobs that I can apply for in this area. I have 25 years prior to this in manufacturing for one company and I worked my way up from the bottom to foremanship doing injection molding. So I do have a lot of prior experience, but I can't get a lot of people that are interested in me or if they are they feel they are going to pay me too much or overqualified or under qualified for the area that they are looking for. So it's been very discouraging especially trying to get people to even interview me.

Another man with a visual impairment, who had been operating a business out of his home for many years, indicated that the business was decreasing in its potential to continue to provide an adequate income. He went on to say,

So I have been for about a year now sending my resume out and going on interviews and just being very frustrated. I am still operating the business. It still is a business, it is still filed with the state, and I am making the most of it, but I am trying to be as practical as I can. I have got two children and I am married and there is no way this is going to

be something that I can continue unless I get a little luck.

Problems at the job because of a disability

A 30-year old man with epilepsy had been able to land a few jobs. However they all ended up being temporary as his epilepsy became more obvious on the job site.

I have had experiences in the work places where as soon as the seizure had occurred people are somewhat puzzled as to what happened but then once it begins to happen more often I think they get tired of seeing it. They don't want to have anything to do with it.

One respondent with anxiety had run into problems once she had started a job. She said,

I think more it's the fact that, you know, being hired usually, that's not the hard part. It's, maybe, once I am there, once I am already working. I'm not very social, per se, because I'm terrified most of the time, and I keep to myself. Therefore, I don't become very popular with say a manager or a boss and in that sense, it is hard.

The interview process

The process of interviewing for a job was seen as an obstacle for some of the participants. Three of the participants were former truck drivers. One of them had an injury on his previous job. Two of them were on heavy pain medication.

Any commercial carriers are just not even going to talk to me. It's a combination of being on disability, being out of work all this time. They don't want nothing to do with me. I have called a number of bigger companies and I basically just get "thanks, sorry no." I'm on a risky dose of pain killers. As far as driving a commercial vehicle, I'm not going to pass the drug test.

Another truck driver said that he had been filling out a lot of applications on the computer. He was now interested in doing any kind of warehouse work. While he had not yet been called in for any interviews, he felt that having an advocate with him on that interview would be helpful. This was true for several other individuals, where the only accommodation that they would need would be someone to help them through the interview process. A former truck driver said,

If there is somebody out there that is going to be able to say ... like an advocate, "OK, look, this guy, he's got chronic pain, he's on medication, he can you know ..." I am qualified to do the job ...I can run pallet jacks, I can run a fork lift ...but I need somebody to say,... "Yeah, look, he can do the job. Yes he's got to take his medication as long as he is not driving a vehicle out on the main roads..."

External sources providing help

Most individuals who called the Connect-Ability toll free number were looking for some sort of support or help in their search for meaningful employment. Some of the individuals had previously worked with a state agency such as the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB), BRS, or one of the BRS contract employment service agencies. Many of those who had worked with a state agency were not optimistic about working with it again. Some who had worked with BRS complained about the slowness of the process, whereas some noted the lack of follow through. However, some individuals had found counselors who were both empathetic and efficient. One of the things that the participants noted with regard to help from

agencies or individual counselors was that a positive experience was usually associated with that counselor's understanding of the individual. Respondents also had varying reactions to the help provided when they called the Connect-Ability toll free line for assistance.

Support and help

Many of the individuals who called the Connect-Ability toll free number were looking for some sort of support or help in their ventures to find meaningful employment. Oftentimes, that desired support or help was minimal, for example, simply advice or advocacy.

A man in his late 30s who has been unemployed since his stroke in 2002 indicated that help in the way of advice or assistance from someone else would be beneficial to help him find a job.

It's nice for somebody to help, you know, knock on doors with you and, you know, open doors for you. I think in terms of getting retraining in something else, so I could have a better shot at finding something. I am at a stage right now where I could go different ways. It would be nice to have someone to be there.

Negative experiences

Some of the participants indicated that their experience with state services or other agencies was not positive. For the most part, the positive or negative reaction to any service agency or organization was often directly related to the particular counselors or professionals that the participant dealt with.

One woman with anxiety had lost her former job because she was terrified to interact with co-workers. She described the assistance that she received from BRS as unhelpful for her situation.

Not really because the places that they refer me to, they have no knowledge of my anxiety and any of the psychological problems so they refer me as if my situation was normal and it isn't, so in a way it's not helpful

The mother of a young man with epilepsy was not at all satisfied with the counseling that her son had received from BRS.

He worked with a counselor in the New Haven [BRS] office and she did not understand because she wouldn't help him with the resume, she wouldn't help guide him in terms of, you know, what's the best work environment given your disability.

The father of a young man with a developmental disability described the situation within the school system. He stated that he was not informed about the transition process that takes place within the school system, or when to start working with any agency.

Well, as I said, the school has done a good job, I think, with the transition and teaching him ... giving him some of the skills he is going to need. But the transition, as you said, from school to the agencies and how that's going to transpire, I guess that has not been communicated real well. I don't know if the agencies should be more involved or should the school be more involved. Or am I not asking the right questions?

Others expressed frustration with the slowness of the process. One man who is totally blind had been learning new technologies from his home office. Currently unemployed, he had been working with BESB. Although they were helping, he described the process as extremely slow.

They're giving me vocational rehab - it's very, very, very slow going. Very slow, like I said. I am the type of person that doesn't like to sit around and wait. I want to move things along a little more quickly than they are going, but due to the workload that BESB has ... and lack of opportunity to get them here, it's ... sort of slow going.

Little or no follow-through with good ideas and plans led some to conclude they were really on their own. One person was upset about a specific counselor who "put her down hard."

There was a woman who just put me down badly and I would not go to them for anything. It's when you are in a wheelchair, you don't necessarily want extra special treatment, you just want to be treated fairly and with the same respect you would anybody else walking through the door. And when somebody starts, "oh well, you couldn't do that" because, you know, you don't want to hear it. I know there are things that I can't do and I know there are things that I can do, but I don't need somebody in stiletto heels and shaded stockings trying to make the judgment for me or against me rather so I just get hung up sometimes with people's attitudes.

Positive experiences

Others had positive things to say about their counselor and other service providers. A key element was the degree to which the agency in general, or the counselor in particular, listened to and responded to this person.

A man who had operated his own business for 28 years until he injured his back thought that the services and assistance he received were helpful.

Yeah - they were all good. BRS was good, Goodwill was good helping me to do my resume properly. BRS was good in allowing me ... I did take one course which was a QuickBooks ... prep course that they gave there.... I was looking actually to go back to college, two years of college.... They both recommended that I get degrees starting out with my associates. That would help me in my job search because that would put me on a level playing field with new kids coming out of college.

One woman had good things to say about her BRS counselor. Her disabilities did not allow her to lift, bend, or be on her feet for a long time.

[The counselor] from the state did not [drop the ball]. She kept calling me back and saying, "have you heard from?" and I would say, "no, actually I haven't and that's the truth." "And what are you looking for now?" she'd say, "what are you looking to do and you know should - we." She tried... to refocus me so we came to kind of a stand still for a month or two and then it went back to we are refocused.... [The counselor] has focused me on two [jobs]. And she said, ... "can you do this alone or do you need help? Do you need help getting the interview or help with somebody during the interview or what? How can we help you?" She was excellent.

It is understanding the person and his or her unique needs in finding employment that makes the job of the BRS counselor so different for each individual. She went on to say

I am happy because I had a caseworker [name], that when I went in one direction refocused me into what was really realistic for what I could do and where my strengths were. If it weren't for [caseworker] saying, "[name], let's look at this whole situation. Can you really do this? Do you want to work weekends? Do you want to work nights? What

are you best at?" And when we discussed it she turned my mind around so, yes, I think I put up some, but my case worker overcame that because she was so knowledgeable and so good.

Some people found that certain employment counselors and agencies tried hard but did not end up finding any job for them. Some thought the counselors did not really know what to do with them. One individual who had vision loss due to surgery for a brain tumor had a mixed experience but had a positive view of his counselor. He commented:

I was applying to BESB at the time. To be perfectly honest with you, I have done whatever I could to avoid BESB. They never hit the spot with me and I think for the most part because of the fact – first and foremost they have to shift gears when it comes to me.... They were there to support me. In fact when I was living downtown the head of BESB was my rehab. counselor. Nice guy. That was when I took this job at the firm that I left in 1997.

Of great importance to the participants was the attitude of the counselor towards the participant, whether they treated the participant as a person and as one who had a real potential for employment. Positive attitudes kept the flame of hope and motivation burning for some participants despite difficult circumstances. One of the participants said,

[I] constantly try to get reassurance from him [his counselor] that I am not imagining what my abilities are. As far as that goes I have been satisfied with that. [My counselor] knows he is dealing with a mature, competent person. I think he would tell me I am being unrealistic for anything that I might be shooting for that is out of my range.

One woman who had had a stroke returned to college as a way of strengthening her skills. She spoke of the positive attitudes of everyone at this community college.

[The college I attend] is dedicated to seeing people succeed. Office staff, teachers, custodial staff, security – everybody. I have never had anybody put me down for a question. They are all positive over there. I swear I get energy off the bricks in that building.

The Connect-Ability toll free number

Some people in the group who had never worked with any of the state agencies anticipated that the Connect-Ability toll free number would be their one stop to finding a job. One 52-year old self-employed man told of his expectations regarding calling that number. Although he was self-employed, he was looking for another job because he could not see continuing with his business because of his disability.

So I'm hoping in my fantasies that when I call this person they are going to open up these channels to me. And I never wanted, I've always wanted to stay very independent. I mean if there is anybody that could get a handicap parking sticker it's me, but I feel like if I can go walk through the store I can walk to the store.

Another participant expressed her excitement about Connect-Ability and told of her previous experiences in trying to find a job. She said,

I had found two jobs through the newspaper that looked promising and I asked the person that I got when I dialed the number if they were jobs that a person could do

sitting down. I figured it was a fair question and both of them said well you would have to do some standing up. And I said and what would you do while you were standing up? I mean, if you have to look through 90 pound bag of mail at the post office it wouldn't work and neither one of them wanted to go into the details, so I kind of got discouraged about searching on my own. So, when I saw the Connect-Ability ad I thought how wonderful that there is somebody who realizes just because I am in a wheelchair it doesn't mean that I am done. ... so I was so encouraged to see that ad.

The initial response to Connect-Ability of the men and women who participated in these extended interviews was quite positive. The ads that prompted their call to the Connect-Ability hot line, the positive and helpful response by Connect-Ability staff who answered their call, and the follow-up short interviews all contributed to their positive impressions of the Connect-Ability project. Almost all respondents were looking for another positive avenue or pathway to finding employers who would be willing to hire a person with a disability. One of the respondents said,

The reason you are here is because I saw the Connect-Ability ad about the musician in Hamden....My whole inspiration in calling was to get myself into that circuit – expose myself to employers who are already accepting and eager to hire people who are disabled. I want to be a part of that. I want the opportunity to let people know what my abilities really are.

Many respondents suggested expanding the networking process. They envisioned Connect-Ability as a one-stop center for bringing together people with disabilities and employers who were willing to give them a chance. Making connections possible through sharing information was seen as a great need. Many suggested that providing contacts, information, and guides to make the journey to find a job more direct and more focused would help a great deal. One of the participants said,

If somebody could point me in the direction of companies that I should be working at – that hire, what do you call it, disabled or broader range of people. Even what types of careers that I should be looking in....

Expanding the role of Connect-Ability to include resources and information to direct potential employees to employers who are willing and ready to interview and hire applicants with disabilities was definitely one of the outcomes that the participants were looking forward to. Some respondents were disappointed that these services were not already in place. Several of the respondents expressed their feelings about this. Some of these comments were,

Where is the service I was told about – a job bank for disability friendly employers?

O.K. just more information from anybody or any place as far as what is out there...any sort of information would help, you know, what type of jobs are out there.

You know I was looking for somebody that maybe has connections out there in the field or companies that are willing to take on people like myself willingly and work with me.

Barriers

Consistent with the findings from the Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment, certain barriers were perceived by individuals as roadblocks to their success in finding employment. These were not the same for every individual as these barriers were frequently tied to a specific type of disability. Transportation and accessibility were common barriers for anyone with a physical disability or vision disability. The need for other accommodations was expressed by other individuals, again depending on the disability. Some people thought that what they really needed was additional training so that they could learn new skills or a new occupation, because their disability prevented them from using their existing skills. The lack of this training could also be construed as a barrier. In addition, the need for some kind of assistive technology could prevent a person from obtaining the job that they want.

While not a particular concern for most of these participants, receiving benefits in the form of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) may also be perceived as a barrier. There is a lot of complexity in the system, and it is sometimes difficult to understand the impact of work on cash and medical benefits. Some individuals identify this complexity as a barrier and may perceive a risk of losing these benefits. Many participants clearly described a barrier in the attitude or biases of potential employers towards people with disabilities.

Transportation

Transportation was one of the most significant barriers to employment mentioned by people with disabilities in the original Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment survey (Robison et al., 2006). Not only those with physical disabilities, but also those with cognitive or mental health disabilities, had a major problem with transportation. The father of the young man with developmental disabilities described the difficulties posed by transportation.

He would need help with transportation, he cannot drive. I think he is capable of using public transportation, but he would need coaching and an education.

A woman with anxiety described her predicament regarding transportation.

It's stressful for me because of my anxiety, and I don't like to be in crowded places. I am very fearful of getting an anxiety attack. The other [issue] is that I don't have the money to take a bus.

A woman using a wheelchair described the difficulty that transportation poses for her, now that she has been applying for jobs in her field.

I've been interviewing at Cigna in Bloomfield. The only way to get to and from Cigna is dial-a-ride. There is no city bus that will take me to there and take me home. I would have to transfer buses 3 times to get to work. I would take a city bus down town and then transfer from there to another bus that's local to Bloomfield and then transfer to go back home and they don't always run on time. And the type of work I am looking for is, sometimes, it could be 12 hours, it could be longer.

One young man with epilepsy worked for some time in New York City where, he said, transportation was not a big issue. Now that he has moved back to Connecticut, he finds transportation to be a huge challenge because he does not drive.

Transportation will serve as a barrier living out here. In the city, however, transportation

is not as big of a problem, especially [in] cities such as New York. It's just a matter of locating where the next work assignment was and public transportation either bus or subway, usually the subways, were in terms of how it is spread out. You can just keep yourself there and you'll walk a couple blocks in either direction to get to where you need to be. Here, I am very dependent upon my parents or anyone else.

Accessibility

For some of the participants, notably those with a physical disability, accessibility would be an issue for any job. A 50-year old woman who had a stroke was currently going back to school and noted some issues with accessible bathrooms at the college she attended.

Well, the other handicap difficulty is in the ladies room facilities, because some people think handicap accessible means just a larger space in the stall and that's not it. Even [name of college], excuse me the ladies room in all the buildings, they have very heavy doors. I am good with my chair, but I cannot roll my chair and open this heavy door at the same time so I have to wait or find a person.

She went on to say that even in applying for or interviewing for any potential job, she would always have to call ahead to see if that place was accessible.

I never go anywhere anymore without calling ahead and asking, "are you wheelchair accessible?" and 9 out of 10 times they don't know what I am talking about. So, I say, "is there a step or 2 steps between the sidewalk and getting in your front door?" [They reply], "oh, well, yeah there is a little one it's just a little one." I say, "well that means I can't get in, but thank you anyway."

A former heavy equipment operator, now in a wheelchair, described the fact that there aren't many jobs one can do because of the limitations of being in a wheelchair.

I am looking for work and I go through the paper, and there is nothing in that paper that suits. Not that it doesn't suit me ... I would go and wash dishes if I had to, but there is nothing in there that actually I could do . . . They have delivery guys and stuff like that that I wouldn't be able to due to the fact of my wheelchair and my legs. You know, I couldn't take stuff out of a box and go bring it onto the second floor or the first floor for that matter.

Need for Accommodations

For these respondents, the need for accommodations at the workplace presented only minor issues. Some found no issue at all as long as an employer was willing to give them a fair chance at a job. For some, the employer accommodation would entail only one small adjustment. For example, another man who worked his entire adult life as a heavy equipment operator for construction had been unemployed for the last 18 months. Although he was a double amputee now looking for factory work, he was able to drive his own truck. He had not gotten beyond the application process for a job. As far as any accommodation, he stated,

It all depends on what it is. Here comes the factory again. It all depends on what it was. I mean a factory job, I am sitting in one spot, I can do it, you know. What I mean, if I got to carry stuff across a floor, that's a little difficult.

A man with low vision who was currently working two part-time janitorial positions recalled the need for certain accommodations at his last position which was foreman for a manufacturing company. He noted,

I had noticed toward the end of my tenure where I had worked 25 years, I found some barriers because of technology coming out with computers and things like that, so the screens were a little hard for me – things like that...I have to start out maybe at a lot slower pace than somebody else who has been on the job, because a lot of the time I won't know what I see or what I can't see until I try it.

The father of a young man with a developmental disability thought that the accommodations would be something as minor as re-directing his son.

He tends to need re-direction fairly often, I would put it, to stay on task, keep focus. As I said earlier, [son] is very social, and so if he were doing a task and someone walked into the room, he would much rather pick up a conversation than continue the task. So he would definitely need maybe that within reason, I guess.

Need for additional training

A few of the individuals who were interviewed agreed that they may need some additional training. The 38-year old man who had experienced a stroke in 2002, said,

I think in terms of getting retraining in something else so I could have a better shot at finding something. I am at a stage right now where I could go different ways

One former truck driver talked about his willingness to get more skills to increase his chances for finding a job.

I have to stand. ... I got to move around. I don't know. Some shipping places want you to be proficient in Excel and stuff like that, some computer stuff, but not all the time, right? If I had to retrain in something, I would do that because that would be no problem. I am sure I can grasp. I can do the computer.

Need for assistive technology

A few of the participants explained a need for some sort of assistive technology in order to be able to go to work. One young man with spina bifida had obtained a job on his own, subsequent to his initial contact with the Connect-Ability toll free number. While in a wheelchair, he was able to get back and forth to work because of a truck that had been modified. His mother answered the interview questions on his behalf. She said,

The state had given him an assistive technology loan and that is how he got his truck. His truck was made accessible and I am sure that you know this, but Connecticut does 100% accessibility for trucks. It is one of the very few states that do accessibility and pay 100%. So they ... his truck is hand brake and hand gas and it's raised and it has a hydraulic lift on it. That was from the state and they paid for that and they will do it for him every 5 years.

BESB was instrumental in helping one person obtain certain computer programs that enhanced his ability to read the screen.

[The BESB counselor] turned me onto “zoom text” so I can read the computer better. Things like that that will help me in my job search ...

Benefits

Often, people with disabilities receive cash benefits and/or medical benefits through Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and other government programs. While receiving these benefits, people with disabilities can work and earn money as long as the amount earned does not exceed a defined limit. If they were to exceed that limit, they could lose certain benefits and healthcare coverage. Most participants interviewed did not seem concerned about benefits. The majority either had no issue with benefits as a barrier or had not really considered it.

One of the men currently working was emphatic about not wanting to accept any benefits.

I would rather be working than collecting benefits. Yeah, because then that way – the way I look at it is, if you work, nobody can tell you [that] you can’t do anything, you know what I mean, there are not restrictions or anything...

A man in his 50s who operated his own business for 28 years until he injured his back, spoke about the dilemma regarding benefits. Just having applied for disability status, he was told by his lawyer not to look for a job. He said,

I have nothing going on now with BRS or vocational rehab at all. I was attempting to do that, and then I was told not to. So, I was trying to be a good citizen by trying to get back into the work force in some capacity while I was going for my SSDI, but according to the way it has been set up, I would have been denied SSDI if I was going, even attempting to go, to try to find a job, whether I was eligible or not.

Employer perceptions

The comments of most respondents concerning whether the process of applying, interviewing and being hired was seen as a barrier indicated that many had not had the opportunity to experience an interview. For some of the respondents who reached the interview stage, however, some forms of discrimination were perceived. This was particularly so for anyone with a physical disability. One man who uses a cane to walk described his impressions regarding one of his interviews:

You go there, and even just one place, I specifically remember. I went there and everything was fine and then she [interviewer] says, “How long is that going to be for?” I said, “How long is what going to be for? I said that’s permanent, that’s the way it is. It says the job is a sit down [job].” [The interviewer said,] “Oh let me talk to my boss. Oh well we’re not having any more hiring. He’s hired everybody he wants to hire, but we’ll call you if we need you. Bye.”

A former truck driver who was injured on the job and who was currently collecting worker’s compensation described a similar situation.

Once I tell them, you know, or if I do talk to them like I have had one instance where I talked to the person, gone to the job, and he goes, “Well, I notice that you limp.” I said, “I was injured at a job.” [He said], “Ok- well we are just reviewing applications at this point,” and in a nice way saying we are not going to hire you. And I never heard

anything from them ever again. So, basically you know, I am not saying that they discriminated against me but as soon as I told them that I was injured and that I am still on compensation, they don't want to have anything to do it with it.

One of the individuals who had an above the knee amputation told a story about one of his interviews in which he was not able to hide his disability.

I was going to interviews fully qualified for jobs, and I would get up and my pant leg would be up, because, I mean, I can't feel my legs, so the pant leg would be up, caught around my knee. And I would walk in and they would just look at you, you know, so that it's like ... the cat's out of the bag. I mean I could hide it with pants, but as soon as somebody sees it, then, you know, because I had to deal with that. That was the tough part, but, you know, you just go on – stay positive.

Others, whose disabilities were not as obvious, may have an easier time finding a job, but then it became difficult to hold on to that job. For example, the young man with epilepsy spoke about whether to disclose his disability or not.

Because if, in fact, I present myself with the fact that I have seizures, already I become a liability, and you know a walking liability, with employers. You have already put yourself into a deep hole and to climb out of it is quite difficult because then you have to convince the employer that there isn't any problem because they already have a mindset that there is going to be a problem one way or the other. You have to convince them that there is no problem. You have to convince them that there isn't a liability to even worry about and that you have the potential just as anybody else to do the same type of work.

Attitudes

A majority of the participants talked about having a positive attitude and keeping their sights set high. While frustrated at being rejected for some jobs, these individuals kept their optimistic outlook and this was seen as a positive reinforcement to their confidence level and potential success. Likewise, having a negative attitude would ultimately lead to failure. Participants who felt well-supported by their families also felt uplifted and remained optimistic. The attitude of positive thinking could be present specifically during the interview or, in general, throughout the whole process of finding a job.

Positive attitudes

Several participants indicated that a positive attitude can help in disarming or forestalling negative employer perceptions. For example, one man believed he was able to land a good job, not because he concealed his disability, but because of his positive attitude and humor.

I just go in there with a positive attitude and just, you know, tell them what I got and put it on the table and, you know, experience-wise and all that. And my personality really helps out, too. ... I made my interviewer laugh a lot and very comfortable so they wanted somebody around the office like that. They had my background with engineering and stuff like that and sales and my personality so they hired me. The funny thing is they didn't even know I was an amputee until I told them after I got hired.

A young man with epilepsy also suggested that a positive outlook was essential.

In order for an employer to see you as a good potential, they need to see you as a positive individual. They need to see you as being open minded, and therefore, I try to remain as open minded as possible. I think I have gotten better over the years in explaining what epilepsy is. Nonetheless, there is such a paranoia about epilepsy in the general public...

Another person said that employers' attitudes had been positive. He anticipated their questions regarding his abilities by just going ahead and doing the work.

You know, for the most part, a lot of people don't think you can do something until you prove to them that you can. So I find it easier just to go ahead and do something, than so much ask for permission, where others didn't need to. So when it came time to present something, they would say, "Well, how are you going to do that." [And I would respond], "I already did that, I already took care of that."

A positive attitude seemed to help individuals persevere, especially when friends and family stayed close and supportive. In addition, potential employers were more likely to welcome this person into the company. One man who had his own business for 28 years said,

I am very comfortable in what I can do. I know what my limitations are and you know I need a little bit more of an education but I believe that I could be beneficial to somebody somewhere. Again because I haven't really seen anybody, I haven't seen any kind of the challenges you know of the work environment.

Attitude of family

Most of the respondents had positive family support with their disability experience and the challenges of rehabilitation along with trying to find a job. When family and friends were supportive and positive, respondents were animated and positive themselves. One of the participants spoke of his family support system.

They support me in any sort of direction I want to go. But, yes, they want me to get up and go, because they know what kind of person I am and that I basically can't sit still. So, yes, they want me out as much as I want to be out.

Negative attitudes

With no support from family members or friends, other participants felt they were alone. One was homeless and living out of his truck with no one to support him. Still another felt useless in the eyes of his family. He said,

[My family]...don't want to have anything to do with me. Can't bring in a paycheck anymore, so I am worthless.

A negative attitude affects each step of the way toward finding a pathway to a job. One respondent admitted that his attitude was not the best.

My attitude is not very good... You always get people telling you they know what pain is like, but somehow they either didn't have it as bad as I did or their problems healed whereas mine is not.

C. Conclusions and Direction for Further Research

Connect-Ability's goal of enhancing and supporting competitive employment for people with disabilities is informed in large part by the experiences of people with disabilities themselves. While significant and useful information was compiled through the surveys, focus groups and interviews conducted during the 2006 Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment, the Pathways to Success project enhances that information on an ongoing basis through periodic in-depth, in-person interviews in which people with disabilities share their stories about their journey to find employment.

The nineteen individuals interviewed during the first year of the Pathways project described journeys toward employment that illustrate many similarities, but also many rich variations based on their experiences. They have in common a willingness and strong desire to work, but each has encountered different hurdles along the way, and many described multiple barriers encountered in their search for appropriate employment.

One prominent theme emerging from the Pathways interviews encompassed a myriad of employment-related issues such as employment aspirations, the process of finding a job, problems experienced on the job due to a disability, and obstacles encountered in the interview process. All Pathways interviewees spoke of their aspirations regarding employment, though many found that their disability interfered with their ability to obtain or maintain a job. Difficulties encountered in the process of finding or keeping a job were often attributed at least in part to the person's disability or others' reactions to the disability.

Other notable themes that surfaced in the interviews include external sources of assistance (such as state agencies or counselors), barriers to employment, and attitudes of job seekers and their families. Many of the interviewees had previously worked with state agencies (such as BRS and BESB), and with individual counselors as part of their employment efforts. Every individual interviewed had also called the Connect-Ability toll-free number in search of additional employment assistance. Reactions to all sources of outside assistance were mixed. Some noted serious complaints about slow, uncaring and ineffectual agency help, while others commended individual counselors for their empathy and efficiency. The initial response to the existence of the Connect-Ability number was positive, though some expressed disappointment that it did not provide an option to directly connect employers and job seekers with disabilities, such as a job bank.

Barriers to employment perceived by individuals as roadblocks to their success in finding employment were wide-ranging. As these barriers were frequently tied to a specific type of disability, they were not the same for every individual. Transportation and accessibility were common barriers for anyone with a physical disability or vision disability. The need for different accommodations was noted by other individuals, again depending on the disability. For a person with an intellectual disability, the accommodation might involve occasional redirection. Some expressed a need for additional training in order to learn new skills or a new occupation, because their disability prevented them from using existing skills. In addition, the lack of appropriate assistive technology prevents some people from obtaining the jobs that they desire. Employer perceptions were also cited as a barrier for many.

Finally, attitudes of job seekers and their families, whether positive or negative, had significant influence on the ability to find and maintain a job. An upbeat, confident attitude even in the face of frustration and rejection, was viewed as essential to future success by disarming negative employer perceptions. Negative attitudes expressed by job seekers were viewed as leading to

failure. Supportive attitudes expressed by family and friends helped job seekers to persevere and remain positive, while lack of such support made at least one job seeker feel “worthless.”

During the next year, the Pathways project will add new participants to the mix, thereby increasing the diversity of the sample, representing a broader spectrum of individuals who have different disabilities, and a greater representation of various demographics. It will also track the original 19 interviewees with periodic interviews to follow the progress of their job search, recording at an individual level how supports and resources play a part in helping people connect to jobs. This may be a more difficult task in light of the adverse financial and employment conditions that have continued into 2009. The responses of those who have shared and will continue to share their journey will give the Connect-Ability team a greater understanding of how to improve the system. With information regarding individual difficulties, the findings will be used to inform not only state agency policy, but also potential employers, so that they may better assist job seekers with disabilities.

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Appendix A

PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS:

The stories of real people and employment

Name:

Address:

Phone Number:

Email Address:

Thank you for agreeing to share the story of your job search with us. Your participation and the information you will share will help many people with disabilities become valuable, contributing members of the Connecticut workforce.

I have a few questions that will help us more completely understand how to support you and other people like you.

- 1) What is your work situation at this moment?

 - 2) Are you employed? If yes, where? For how long?

 - 3) Tell me what your experience was searching for and obtaining your current or most recent job.

 - 4) If you are not employed, have you received help in finding a job?
From whom?

If no, why?

Are you finding this help useful?

What kind of a job do you want?

 - 5) Are you satisfied with your current job or are you satisfied with your progress toward finding another job? (if yes or no, why?)
-

Please describe in more detail your journey toward a career/job of your choice.

a) What have been (were) the helpful/supportive elements of your job search (people/agencies/services/organizations)?

b) What have been (were) the barriers you encountered along the way?

*Transportation?

*Applying, interviewing, being hired, being promoted?

*Attitudes----your own, of the employer, your family, your school or employment counselor, other?

*Accessibility and Accommodations?

*Understanding your benefits?

c) What supports, services and accommodations will help (were helpful) in your job search?

d) Are there any other comments or suggestions you wish to make to fill out your story?

Thank You for taking the time to speak with me. Your story and experiences will help so many more people with disabilities who are seeking satisfying employment.

I will be getting back to you in 6 months to continue the story. Thank You.