

The Importance of Natural Supports

“Natural supports” are methods of inclusion and assistance that exist in any given workplace, and that an employee with a disability can tap into. These supports help the person to perform her role, and also to feel socially included—which is crucial for high performance and job retention.

Natural supports can involve people, procedures, customs, tools, and benefits that are typically available in the workplace, along with individualized supports seen as normative within the setting.

Here are some examples of natural supports:

- An employee with a disability takes part in the typical training and “on-boarding” process that all employees go through, with additional support from human resources personnel to complete forms and review the business handbook.
- Coworkers invite the employee to the usual workplace coffee hour, which happens every Tuesday morning from 8:30 to 9:30.
- The employee’s supervisor goes over the employee’s to-do list every afternoon to keep tabs on what he’s accomplished.
- The employee’s office mate reminds her when it’s time to leave for the afternoon so that she doesn’t miss her bus.

These supports allow an employee with disabilities to engage in social rituals and to become a full member of her workplace. They also help her to strengthen her independence on the job. The supports may be spontaneously generated in the workplace, or they may be facilitated by employment services staff.

All employees (with and without disabilities) seek out help to get their jobs done. For each person, that assistance is based on individualized needs. Figuring out these needs and helping to facilitate appropriate natural supports is imperative as you assist people with disabilities on the job.

Social Inclusion: Essential for High Performance

One key aspect of natural supports is that they increase employees’ social inclusion at the workplace.

This inclusion is critical for professional success. Could you succeed at your own job if you weren’t part of a team, or didn’t communicate effectively with your coworkers? Would you stay at your job if you felt socially excluded?

How well you fit in socially at work goes beyond your job satisfaction. It also influences how your supervisor and coworkers view your job performance, and how they approach solving problems you have on the job.

Establishing a natural support network for a worker with disabilities is an important part of your job as an employment professional. It's also fundamental to fading your own support over time.

How Workplace Inclusion Happens

For many people with significant disabilities, social inclusion at work has been a challenge. While our schools, communities, and workplaces are becoming more inclusive of people with disabilities, we still often make assumptions about what they can and cannot do. Many disabilities, including autism, also affect people's social interactions, and can be misunderstood in the workplace.

The good news is that social connections at work can smooth many bumpy interactions. These connections also affect the formal and informal training and support a worker receives.

Here are some steps you can take to ensure that a person with a disability will be fully included in the workplace:

Create the expectation throughout the job development process that the **employer will provide training and support** for the worker, as they would with any other employee. This can include identifying coworkers who will act as trainers or mentors for the worker with a disability.

If job coaching is part of the support plan, explain to the employer the **role of the job coach**. The job coach is there to supplement, not substitute for, the supports available within the workplace.

Explain to the employer the importance of social inclusion to the **long-term success** of the employee.

Discuss the **specific support needs** of the individual, and how these will be met, in a way that enhances his inclusion, rather than stigmatizing him. Provide functional guidance and information that will invite comfortable interactions. Under what conditions does the new employee do his best work? What are the most effective ways to communicate with him?

Ensure that the area where the person with a disability will be working is not isolated, but is **physically integrated into the workplace**.

Design the job so that the worker has **regular contact and interaction** with coworkers.

Have the employee work a **similar schedule to others**, with the same break times, meal times, etc.

Basic Principles to Keep in Mind

Here are some basic principles to help make sure natural supports function well.

Each workplace has its own culture. Learn the informal rules and norms of each workplace, along with the features and benefits that the business offers. This will help you assist a worker in developing supports and social connections—in other words, fitting in. This includes learning about opportunities such as tuition reimbursement and gym membership, as well as the social rituals of the workplace (breaks, lunch, parties, etc.), and how the worker can participate.

Social integration comes first, not second. Research has shown that new workers first develop social connections, and then master their job responsibilities. It's often those social relationships that help develop natural supports. Social connections also help create the flexibility that allows natural supports to function.

External support has multiple effects on the workplace. The presence of agency staff on the worksite, as well as how you define your role there, influences how the employer and coworkers view and interact with the new employee. Role-model positive interactions, being respectful of the individual and choosing the least intrusive ways to provide assistance.

Ongoing support requires strong business partnerships. As employers and coworkers play a larger role in training and supporting workers with disabilities, your role shifts as well. You become more of a supplementary resource, providing backup and consultation as needed.

Cautions About Natural Supports

Natural supports can have pitfalls, like any other strategy. Here are some things to watch out for.

Don't impose a new model upon the business. Instead, encourage employers to become more involved, starting with the job development process. You'll be there to support both the employer and the worker throughout the tenure of employment.

Don't use natural supports as an excuse to provide skimpy services, or to withdraw agency support. Natural supports aren't about dumping all responsibility on the employer. A key feature of supported employment is that agency support is long-term.

Don't try to turn coworkers into disability services professionals. Employers and coworkers will often need your expert guidance to understand and interact with a worker with disabilities. They don't need to become disability experts, but they do need to interact with all employees as unique individuals.

The Bottom Line

Natural supports can help you improve the career experience of the employees with disabilities you serve. They can also be useful as you fade your own presence on the job site over time. So make sure to discuss natural supports with job seekers, new hires, and supervisors.