

Insights into advancing 'employment first' to support individuals with disabilities

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For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the National Conference of the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) met in person to advance competitive job placement for people with disabilities who were once considered "too hard to place" and the profession that supports this important work.

A cross-section of the 70 presentations at the June 2022 event are featured in a special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation (JVR)*. The collection of research articles reflects on the important

developments over the past 40 years and advocates for codifying existing and emerging practices.

"As the world recovers from the economic and educational disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and adjusts to new workforce norms, it is more important than ever to translate emerging research in ways that can guide and inform practice in the nascent Employment Support field. This special issue of JVR helps to advance the ongoing conversation about how to realize Employment First," explained Julie J. Christensen, MSW, Ph.D., Executive Director, APSE, Rockville, MD, U.S., who guest edited the special issue.

Employment First is a national systems-change framework adopted by the US Department of Labor that is centered on the premise that all individuals, including those with the most significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in the workforce, which is known as "competitive integrated [employment](#)," or CIE, and community life.

Supported Employment (SE) is considered the gold standard of evidence-based practices for achieving CIE for people with disabilities. Its success in supplanting segregated employment or non-work alternatives for an array of populations, as well as its benefits for employees and employers, have been well documented. Various adaptations to extend the [positive outcomes](#) to underserved populations have emerged: Customized Employment (CE) is one example that focuses on individuals with the most significant and complex disabilities.

An editorial by JVR's Editor-in-Chief Paul Wehman, Director of Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, U.S., provides a comparative overview of the various approaches to inform [policy makers](#), practitioners, advocates, and clients. He also reports that many of the presentations at APSE 2022 centered around the need to put intentionality behind embedding equity,

diversity, and inclusion practices into all aspects of the work.

At the conference, attendees shared strategies for increasing employment outcomes from transition-aged youth—a population that is particularly at risk as a result of the K-12+ education disruptions throughout the pandemic. Building and supporting the employment support professional (ESP) pipeline was also raised as a pressing issue.

Discussions focused on attracting more candidates as job coaches and developers; elevating the field by obtaining standard occupational code designation by the Labor Department and other public policy advances; incentivizing career pathways and retention by securing greater state recognition of Certified Employment Support Professional (CESP) certification; and establishing flexible rate reimbursement models that reward expertise with higher wages.

"It is my hope that emerging evidence across all current modalities are evaluated with an eye towards principles of universal design for learning—is it usable, accessible, and inclusive? We should coalesce around lessons learned and how they can be broadly applied to benefit the field as a whole," advised Dr. Wehman.

Dr. Christensen added that "APSE is grateful for the continued partnership with JVR and the opportunity to publish our 2022 Conference Proceedings special issue as a sampling of the incredible expertise across our network."

She highlights the contribution by Vikki Ortiz, MSc, Employment Services, Developmental Disabilities Resource Center (DDRC), Lakewood, CO, U.S., which advances a strong case for the importance of ensuring that ESPs have access to quality training that is grounded in evidence-based practices. "If Employment First leaders and service providers seek to elevate the professionalization of the SE field, an

onboarding journey that is both standardized and customized must be a cornerstone of professional development," Ms. Ortiz noted.

In another article, lead author Alberto Migliore, Ph.D., Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA, U.S., presents evidence about ES-Coach, a tool that helps ESPs visualize the implementation of supported and customized employment, reflect, set goals, and take action for continuous quality improvement, thereby "contributing to [their] professionalization and recognition... and [playing] a key role in determining the quality of life of people with disabilities."

More information: Vikki Ortiz et al, Impactful onboarding for supported employment professionals: A firm foundation for employment first supports, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2023). [DOI: 10.3233/JVR-230017](https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-230017)

Paul Wehman, Supported employment and customized employment: How effective are these interventions and what has been their impact on the field?, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2023). [DOI: 10.3233/JVR-230022](https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-230022)

Alberto Migliore et al, Supporting employment consultants leveraging data to deliver quality services and outcomes, *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (2023). [DOI: 10.3233/JVR-230015](https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-230015)

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