

11-13-15

To: Employment First stakeholders

From: Mike Maley, Statewide Employment First Coordinator

Re: Employment First Question of the Month: “Will people with I/DD be isolated if they work in the community?”

(Please forward to your local partners & stakeholders)

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We will regularly publish answers to an **Employment First Question**. These provide good discussion topics and help provide guidance on the work going forward as we implement the Governor’s Executive Order 15-01 and the Employment First Integrated Employment Plan.

Question: “Will people with I/DD be isolated if they work in the community? Will they fit in with the broader community?”

One of the goals of our service system is that a person with an intellectual or developmental disability (I/DD) has a life that reflects that of someone without a disability. Like with other people, the workplace has social interactions, but is not the primary place you socialize with friends. A social life is often something that primarily happens outside of work, and that should be true for people with I/DD like it is for others. Most of us don’t go to work to socialize or see our spouses or partners. We see friends, family and loved ones during our non-work times. Why would this be different for people who experience disabilities?

That said, if social interaction and relationships is important to a person, this should be strongly considered during employment planning. A person who places a very high priority on social interactions should not be in a job where the culture or pace of work does not allow this. A good job match should consider the type of work environment that fits a person.

When we have gone around the state to learn about success stories, we repeatedly hear from employers and coworkers of people with I/DD who are working in community jobs that they “fit here.” For example, [Ian](#) from Bend-based company, Ruffwear, is an outdoor enthusiast and loves dogs. Ruffwear sells outdoor gear for dogs. Ian absolutely fits into the Ruffwear work environment. His disability doesn’t define him at work – instead Ian has good relationships with his coworkers because he has similar interests, such as a love of animals and the outdoors. Assuming that someone with I/DD won’t make friends or have good relationships

with coworkers is making the assumption that the only thing that defines them is their disability. But we know this isn't true for anyone. Every person, regardless of disability, has interests, skills, passions and unique qualities that make them who they are.

Leaving a workshop for a community job should be looked at as an opportunity to expand a person's social circle, not limit it. A full life can include social outings and fun with people with disabilities, as well as peers and coworkers who do not have disabilities.

Personal agents, service coordinators and providers can alleviate the fear of losing contact with friends from the sheltered workshop by supporting people to maintain communication and continue in social activities outside of work hours.

For instance, take the story of [Vivian](#). Vivian wanted to work in a community job to earn more money. She also has strong friendships she wanted to keep. She participates in a bowling club where she sees her friends several times a week. Her paycheck from her community job has also allowed her to buy more supplies for her bowling.

An [article in the journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities](#) sums it up well: "Individuals need to be supported to make friendships in community employment as well as to maintain their friendships from the workshop. They need opportunities to form relationships with individuals who share common interests and hobbies rather than just a disability."

I would add that the measure of true success in our support services system is when we are helping people with I/DD to build a real life like anyone else has.

Thank you all for your continued involvement, support, and advocacy for services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Oregon. If you have comments or other questions, please email them to employment.first@state.or.us.

~ Mike