

Collaborating with Employers: Tips for Successful Partnerships

Introduction

Students should have paid employment while in college as they prepare for their future careers, and program staff play a vital role in supporting students to obtain jobs. While supporting students in getting a job is important, support doesn't stop once the student gets a job. Once students are hired, it is necessary to provide on-the-job support through job coaches or staff that provide on the job support. In addition to supporting students, a key component of job coaching is supporting employers. This can be a new skill for many staff working in college programs for students with intellectual disability (ID). So, how do you support employers?

The Role of a Job Coach

The first step in supporting an employer is knowing what role a job coach has when interacting with employers. Job coaches wear many hats when providing student support (i.e., trainer, model, advocate). Likewise, job coaches also wear many hats when supporting employers that have hired students. Some of the roles job coaches may have when supporting employers include:

- **Partner:** A job coach works collaboratively to ensure that the employment experience benefits the student and the business site. Employers and job coaches work together to ensure that the student receives the training, support, and accommodations needed for success. They also work together to make sure that business goals and needs are met.
- **Educator:** Many employers are excited to partner with inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) programs and hire students. However, not all employers have experience and knowledge of best practices for supporting employees with disabilities. Job coaches educate the employer partners by providing training on disability awareness, resources on accommodations, and feedback on inclusive practices.
- **Consultant:** While job coaches provide supplemental training on tasks and workplace behaviors, students should engage in all supervision and training procedures other employees receive from the employer. Job coaches promote independence by being a consultant to employers on ensuring the training and supervision procedures meet the needs of students. Job coaches can also provide consultation on how to best provide accommodations or task modification to promote student success.
- **Mediator:** Issues happen on the job, especially as students learn to navigate a new work environment. These issues can be between students and employers, coworkers, or business guests. At times, job coaches may advocate with the student and help employers navigate these situations.

How to Best Support an Employer

Each job site and employer are different. These differences will create unique situations and needs. However, there are general practices that help facilitate a good relationship with employers and a successful experience for students. Here are some tips to support employers:

- Establish clear roles and expectations of the job coach and business
Example: Employers should not expect a job coach to be with the student 100% of the time. The goal is for the student to become as independent as possible as their need for support decreases. From the beginning of the partnership, set the expectation that the job coach's time on-site will decrease over time.
- Create and maintain open and honest lines of communication
Example: Listen to the employer's concerns and do not immediately become defensive. Actively listen, then discuss how you can work collaboratively to support a student through the issue.
- Be trustworthy, reliable, and approachable
Example: If you tell an employer a specific time you will be on-site to provide support, be

there! If a conflict comes up, find alternative coverage and let the employer know why you couldn't get to the job site. Employers want to work with programs and program staff they can rely on to provide the supports they promised.

- Foster positive relationships with both the employer and coworkers
Example: Take the time to stop and ask coworkers how they are doing. Find common ground and build rapport. They are the people students will interact with most, and you want coworkers to feel comfortable reaching out when they want education, training, or mediation.
- Use familiar terminology
Example: Identifying natural supports to help students in their day-to-day routine is important to building independence. Some employers will recognize the term 'natural supports,' while others may not be familiar with the term. When seeking input from the employer, instead of asking who would make a good 'natural support' for the student, ask the employer who might be a good mentor or trainer.
- Communicate in the employer's preferred method
Example: Ask an employer how they would like you to communicate with them. Use their preferred method of communication, even if it is different than how you may communicate with other campus partners.
- Follow the business site's policies and procedures when on the site
Example: If the student is required to dress in business attire as an employee, coaches should do the same.
- Provide the employer with specific ways to provide feedback on the role and performance of a job coach through evaluation procedures
Example: Create mid and final-semester evaluations that include questions such as: How satisfied are you with the job coaching support from the program? Or: How has the job coaching support provided by the program benefited the business?

Conclusion

Positive partnerships with employers create better experiences for students. When job coaches are intentional about supporting employers and fostering quality relationships, it benefits the current student and paves the way for future opportunities for other students. Employers want to work with people they connect with and trust. Best practices in job coaching are not limited to supporting students with disabilities, but also the employers that hire students. Collaborating with employers can lead to lasting and beneficial relationships that benefit the students, program and employers.

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