

New job development program for intellectually disabled



By Tony Pearson

'Real work for real pay' - that's the new catch-phrase as the North Hastings Community Living Association launches a new job development program for people suffering from intellectual disabilities (formerly referred to as 'mentally impaired').

In the past, job creation for those with such impairments focused on 'sheltered industries' - closed shops such as ARC industries, whose disabled workers produced products like furniture for sale or subcontracted with other producers to handle a part of the process. While providing employment, this kept these workers in a kind of 'job ghetto' rather than becoming part of the regular labour force.

Still, some mentally challenged workers did get 'regular' jobs - enough that their job performance could be measured. And the findings were very interesting. Almost all such workers (97 per cent) were average or above average in terms of workplace safety. Over 9 in 10 were classed by their employers as 'hard-working?', 'positive?', and 'reliable?'. Three quarters showed a good work ethic, even when working part-time. So it is not surprising that 86 per cent of employers rated them as 'good employees' in the ordinary, non-sheltered sense of the term, and found them an asset to their businesses.

Taking these findings, three area Community Living agencies - in Bancroft, Madoc, and Quinte West - have banded together to launch a new placement program: ACE ('Accessing Customized Employment?'). The central concept is to explore with employers the job situations they find hard to fill, and then find a disabled worker whose strengths and preferences match the job requirements. Newly hired job developers Joey DeFreitas and Kali Meeks gave some examples. In one case, a day care centre needed a helper during their noon rush period, which is only two hours per day. Normally it's difficult to attract someone to that short a part-time job. But for a mentally challenged worker, the attraction isn't so much the salary as the feeling of accomplishment and self-esteem that comes with being part of the labour force - so a successful placement was made. Sometimes the routine of a clerical job like filing is deemed too boring by a young worker; however, it may not be so to a disabled person. The program currently has about 25 clients ready for placement. Since the program got rolling in May, six intellectually impaired clients have found regular jobs, and two more are just waiting for the paperwork to clear.

DeFreitas stressed that the jobs performed had to make business sense.

'We and our clients are not looking for charity, but for a mutual benefit.' Another example he cited was the case of an auto mechanic who had enough business for one, but not two, mechanics. 'He had to stop his highly profitable repair work every so often to clean his shop. It made sense to his bottom line to bring in a lower cost cleaner, as he then had more time to work on engines.'

Meeks noted that she and DeFreitas can handle all the planning - the work analysis and job niche development - and then look at their clients' job skills and interests in order to make a good match. They then follow up with job coaching and performance monitoring. 'If the placement doesn't work, the employer is free to terminate it. We want the employer to benefit as much as the employee. Everything is customized to meet the company's unique needs.'

DeFreitas added: 'It also lowers turnover and reduces training time and cost. We're looking for win-win situations.'

Meeks added that the key is to get people to look at capabilities rather than disabilities. ?These people are ready, willing, and able. As the Mission Statement of Bancroft Community Living puts it, through local partnerships, we hope that our clients are able to become fully participating citizens of their community.

Those interested in this program should call North Hastings Community Integration Association (613-332-2090) and ask about ACE.?