

UIC Academy for Policymakers Podcast Transcript

Current Labor Force Trends are Favorable to the Practice of Supported Employment: New Opportunities for Policymakers

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JC: Hello. My name is Judith Cook and I direct the University of Illinois at Chicago's Center on Mental Health Services Research and Policy. Today I'll be discussing current labor force trends with the potential to influence employment among people with mental health and other types of disabilities. These trends are also relevant to policymakers whose goal is to increase labor force participation among people with disabilities, while building a skilled and productive workforce. As we'll learn, these trends are strongly favorable to the practice of supported employment, a service that returns people with disabilities to work. Awareness of these trends can allow us to more closely align workforce development and disability employment policy, thereby strengthening the U.S. economy while stimulating individual economic prosperity.

The first trend is a tight job market. The U.S. economy is approaching full employment, which means that job creation has outpaced the number of available workers. Employers now need to compete for a dwindling supply of Americans who are looking for work. As a result, companies are expending greater and greater effort on worker recruitment. They're offering higher salaries, better benefits, and popular perks to attract talent. This also includes reaching out to new groups of workers, including those with mental health and other types of disabilities. This increases the marketability of supported employment clients, since they are screened and motivated to work. In the supported employment model called Individual Placement and Support, or IPS, staff reach out to employers and present them with qualified job candidates for available positions. For those employers struggling with recruitment, this is a welcome service. Today's tight labor market suggests that now is the time to consider increased funding for supported employment services, since they help meet employers' needs for motivated, qualified workers.

The second labor force trend is the growth of a multi-generational work force. Work is increasingly done by groups of people from three and even four generations, spanning younger, middle-aged & older cohorts. This is partly related to the first trend of worker scarcity. But it's also due to the fact that today's workers are retiring at older and older ages. To manage this multi-generational workforce, employers are fostering appreciation for worker differences and encouraging cross-generational mentorship. Both of these trends are valuable to workers with mental health disabilities, who may be perceived as different, and who haven't had the chance to receive mentoring to enhance their job skills. This greater age diversity also opens up opportunities for a wider age range of job seekers, including young adults and older workers. Policymakers in the areas of youth transition and senior employment services can look to this

new trend to support greater attention to and investment in supported employment services for these age groups.

The third trend is workplace automation and the rise of artificial intelligence, or AI. Almost all work is increasingly automated, and the role of humans in the workplace is changing. This doesn't mean that people are being replaced by machines, as we used to say. Instead, there is a need for both artificial and human intelligence. People are now performing the non-routine "soft" skills that AI cannot contribute. This includes offering empathy and sensitive communication. It also involves critical thinking and strategic planning which require uniquely human cognitive abilities. There are also physical skills needed at the workplace, along with technology management, installation, and upkeep. Since they work with clients before and after hiring, supported employment staff are well-positioned to prepare job seekers for these new roles. For example, the IPS model often includes staff providing job training to newly-hired workers. IPS staff also provide valuable coaching to help workers be flexible and adapt to automation with confidence. Workplace automation is a trend disability employment policymakers will want to pay attention to. They'll want to ensure that publicly-funded supported employment programs are equipped to prepare people to participate fully in an automated U.S. workplace.

The fourth and final trend is "workplace churn," which refers to the constant mix of employees starting new jobs while others are leaving. This has a negative effect on a company's bottom line with evidence showing that cutting churn can increase revenue significantly. Churn also has a negative effect on worker productivity and morale, so it's a real headache for employers. However, it can create opportunities for job seekers, particularly those receiving services that are designed to help them stay at work. Employers who work with supported employment programs know that workers from these programs will receive extra assistance and encouragement to keep their jobs, which can then reduce workplace churn. More now than ever, the U.S. labor force needs a service like supported employment because it addresses the critical need for motivated, dependable workers who make long-term commitments to their jobs.

Knowledge about the four trends I've just described can be used to design disability employment policy that supports a productive and diverse workforce in the context of full employment. The value of supported employment services to workforce development is becoming increasingly clear in the context of a tight labor market. Also evident is the need for return to work policies that use the latest technology to prepare workers with disabilities for automation and working with AI. A deeper pool of qualified workers of all ages is needed to fuel economic growth, and supported employment can help to fill that pool. Awareness of current labor force trends can be used to align public policies around workforce development and disability employment. Better alignment can then accelerate economic growth while welcoming people with mental health and other disabilities into our new economy.

Announcer: Thank you for listening. You can obtain additional recordings, or download a transcript, by visiting the Academy for Policymakers on the Center's web site.