



Providing Employment Services for Job Seekers Remotely

By Nicholas Holz, Andrea Cooper, and David Hoff

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, day and employment service providers have had to quickly determine how best to provide supports for people they serve. For many this means transitioning to services and supports that can be provided remotely. This brief is one in a series developed to help community providers continue to provide services to those who are currently working, seeking employment, or engaged in community-based day supports.

During this time, we are all learning how to best support the people we serve. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we all work together to provide services that help people to continue to work towards their goals while staying safe and healthy.

ICI COVID-19 resources: covid19.communityinclusion.org

Successfully assisting an individual with significant disabilities to become employed requires guiding and supporting them through a process of self-awareness and discovery that enables them to identify their employment interests and aspirations. Typically these experiences involve extensive time spent with individuals in the community, exploring options and developing a clear employment vision. With limitations on both personal contact and time spent in the community, there is a need to consider alternative strategies. This publication is a guide to provision of employment services remotely, focusing on assisting and supporting individuals who are not currently working, but in the process of employment planning, exploration, and job seeking.

A Time For Creativity and Staying Focused

Given the current climate caused by COVID-19, providers of employment services for individuals with disabilities are looking for ways to continue to engage both their staff and those who receive their services - and doing so without risking the health and safety of either group. If possible, every effort should be made to fully provide services and supports. This requires that the organization be creative in service delivery and find new ways of providing these services that abide by social distancing guidelines and requirements, including use of technology.

Even though services cannot be delivered in the usual way, this does not mean that our values have disappeared. While services are occurring in a remote format, they must continue to be inclusive, individualized, and self-directed. The options offered must be based on the needs, skills, and interests of those receiving services, and with a sense of urgency.

At least over the short term, jobs are going to be more challenging to find. However, we must avoid an attitude of “now is not the time” in terms of employment. Keep a focus on the Employment First principles of employment as a priority, and remember that people with disabilities continue to be part of the mix of individuals being prepared for and looking for fulfilling work. There are still businesses that are hiring, and this will likely require service providers being more creative and diligent than ever in assisting individuals to find employment opportunities and providing superior services to businesses.

For those who are unable to find work, now is a great time to prepare them for employment and help them develop additional skills. That way, when the economy does improve, they are ready to take advantage of the available opportunities.

The What and How of Providing Services Remotely

Providers may struggle not only with the “how” of providing services, but also with the “what.” What



services can be provided if we are not able to meet directly with individuals or employers? In some cases, there is no way to replicate all the elements of an activity provided in person (such as a job tour or informational interview). However, using creativity and the technology at your disposal, you can continue to provide your usual employment services, though they might look a bit different.

Determining available technology

The first step in providing remote services is to canvas those that receive services to determine what technology they have access to, their understanding of and facility with using various platforms, and the support they have in using the desired technology. Next, you can adjust how you provide services accordingly. During this process, it should be about providing individualized services that meet the needs of the individual and not the needs of the provider.

Designing methods for service delivery

Once this assessment has been completed, construct methods to provide employment services remotely. Focal points of remote employment services can include person-centered planning, discovery, job development, soft skill training, hard skill development, and job club activities – i.e., the same employment services and supports that are typically provided. Most of these can continue through basic conversations via phone or video conference.

However, don't rely just on verbal conversations. Use written and visual materials, as well as other methods if at all possible, in support of a [Universal Design for Learning approach](#). For example, if you're providing services using an online video platform, take full advantage of its capabilities in terms of showing websites, videos, documents, and visuals. It can be much easier to get guest speakers via online platforms than in person, particularly with so many people spending time at home.

While you will need to modify existing ways of conducting services, there is no need to completely discard what you have done previously. Take a look at your existing service flow and service strategies. Consider how these can be delivered via remote services. Review the tools used for person-centered planning, discovery, career exploration, and career preparation, and consider how these can be adapted for use remotely.

(See the other publications in this series, [Providing Quality Services Remotely and Online](#), and [Using Technology to Provide Quality Services Remotely](#), for general strategies on remote service delivery and use of technology.)

The Array of Employment Services and How to Provide Them Remotely

Job Counseling

Standard job counseling can continue to be done via video or by phone.

- ▶ Conduct basic meetings to continue discussing job options, follow up on previous meetings, update an employment plan, etc.
- ▶ Within these meetings, address the current situation. Discuss concerns the individual has about social distancing and staying at home, as well as the impact on prospects for employment. This includes addressing any fears the individual has about going to work, and any stressors that arise while they are at home.
- ▶ If the individual has recently become unemployed, help them manage the situation, both practically and emotionally. If they are eligible for unemployment benefits, assist them in filing for these benefits.
- ▶ Offer assistance with managing the economic impact and government aid during the pandemic. For more guidance, see the publication in this series, [Dealing with the Economic Impact of COVID-19 and Getting Financial Supports](#).

Remote Career Exploration and Discovery

A critical initial phase of employment is career exploration and discovery. Discovery is a person-centered planning process that involves getting to know a person before supporting them in developing a plan for employment.

A wide variety of activities can help individuals determine an employment pathway, and the depth and variety of activities depends on the background and previous experience of the individual. Think of all the activities you conduct when completing career exploration and discovery. These might include person-centered planning meetings, community mapping, identification of networks, informational interviews, tours of employment sites, job tryouts, discussions concerning accommodations and when to ask for them, exploring career options, and conversations concerning transportation and benefits.

The following are specific strategies for remote delivery of career exploration and discovery activities. Griffin-Hammis Associates has also put together [Virtual Discovery Service Delivery Guidance](#), which has a wide array of ideas regarding how to conduct discovery virtually.

Person-centered planning

Person-centered planning is an ongoing process for selecting and organizing the services and supports that a person needs, and is directed by the person receiving support. It typically involves multiple people selected by the individual, often meeting as a group. The process helps the person identify their interests, dreams, strengths, and goals, and then uses their network to move forward on achieving these goals.

In remote service delivery, person-centered planning for employment can be done online live via video, or by phone conference, using the standard protocols and guidelines. Person-centered planning is typically a facilitated discussion of free flowing ideas, often in a social-type atmosphere. Conducting person-centered planning remotely requires being thoughtful and diligent in maintaining that atmosphere as best you can.

If you are using video for person-centered planning, here are a few ideas about how to use/take advantage of the technology:

- ▶ Have the target person gather pictures of things they like to do, and experiences they've enjoyed, that they can share. Also, consider putting these in a video.
- ▶ Have a document or template on the screen with different categories for person-centered planning, and as the group brainstorms, fill in the categories.
- ▶ Have a facilitator on camera with a flipchart to record information.
- ▶ Have the individual and staff together interview individuals in the person's network for ideas to inform the person-centered planning process.
- ▶ The following resources can be helpful in conducting person-centered planning remotely:
 - [Person-Centered Plan Template](#) (Council on Quality and Leadership) - Template for individuals to develop a person-centered plan using pictures.
 - [Career Planning Resources](#) (Employment First Massachusetts) Variety of resources on person centered planning and employment.
 - [PowerPoint Presentation](#): Using technology and apps for person-centered planning and transition supports (Arc of Westchester)

Job exploration

If an individual has internet access, there are wide variety of options for exploring different types of jobs online through viewing of videos and other visuals. You can view these with individuals and discuss. Also, you can help an individual develop a list of potential jobs to explore, and have them explore the jobs on their own. The next time you meet, discuss what the person liked and didn't like about the jobs they researched.

The following are some websites with videos of different jobs.

- ▶ [Able Eyes Virtual Employer Tours](#)
- ▶ [AG Explorer](#)
- ▶ [CareerOneStop Virtual Career Tours](#)
- ▶ [VocFit](#)
- ▶ [The Career Index](#)
- ▶ [Virtual Job Shadow](#)

Labor market information

With a job seeker you're supporting, visit your [state's labor market information website](#) to find information about occupations, employers, and the outlook for various jobs. [CareerOneStop](#), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, also has a wide variety of information. [O*NET Online](#) is also an excellent resource for exploring career options.

Community exploration

During the remote discovery process, enter the job seeker's address into Google. Then click on the street view and conduct a virtual walking tour with them to see what businesses are nearby. Document the businesses that are seen along the way and then complete more research on these businesses in a job development setting. You can also discuss each business and the interest level the individual has in that type of employment.

Employer research

Based on the individual's person-centered plan and information generated through the initial stages of discovery, research potential employers online, through looking at company websites, social media, company reviews, and other information generated through on-line searches. As you do this, guide the individual through the process of how to conduct such research, how to determine if the type of business or employer is a potential good match, and whether the business or occupation is worth further exploration.

Informational interviews

Informational interviews with employers can be done via video platforms or by phone. Through your networks, help individuals identify employer representatives they can talk to about potential careers, that align with what has been learned through the person-centered planning and discovery processes to date. With so many people working from home, employers may welcome the opportunity to interact with others and share information about their business. This is not only a great option for individuals, but also a good chance for staff to learn more about local businesses and possible opportunities.

Employer tours

What if you wanted to conduct a tour of the employer's facility? Reach out to employers you have a strong relationship with that are still operating at their facility, and ask them to take photos or videos. If the employer is willing, this experience could be enhanced utilizing a 360-degree camera and uploading the pictures to a site such as [Make TV](#), thus creating a virtual tour. An employer may also be willing to use a video camera and be on the phone while they walk through their site so they can answer questions about the different functions or positions seen.

Benefits counseling

Providing reassurance and guidance on going to work while managing public benefits is an important component of preparing for work. When discussing benefits, share your screen and visit [Disability Benefits 101](#) or similar sites where the individual can assist in entering the necessary information. That can help them see how various situations may play out in terms of different levels of wages and earnings as they look for work. You can also visit your state's [Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Program's \(WIPA\) website](#) and explore the resources there. Have the individual connect with WIPA staff for benefits assistance. The [Ticket to Work website](#) also has a variety of tutorials and webinars on benefits and related issues that individuals may find helpful.

Transportation and travel training

Work with individuals on exploring various options for transportation for employment, on basic travel instruction, and how to take a larger role in self-managing their transportation. [The Kennedy Center's "A Chance to Ride" curriculum can be a useful resource.](#)

Accommodations

Help the individual identify potential job accommodations that might benefit them. Start by identifying the tasks they would be performing in a position, and how accommodations might help them succeed in performing those tasks. If you are both online, use the meeting platform to discuss identifying and understanding accommodations and when to ask for them, and to also find and demonstrate various options. [The Job Accommodation Network](#) is a good resource for doing this.

Assistive technology

Work with individuals to explore assistive technology that may assist and benefit the person on the job. [Your state's assistive technology \(AT\) program](#) has access to AT items, and can demonstrate the items' use and loan them out. Reaching out to this organization and other such entities through online platforms could be engaging for both the individual served and for you. Time can also be spent exploring possible apps and teaching an individual how to use them. Additional resources include [AbleData](#) and the [ATCoalition](#).

(For additional information, see the other publication in this series [Assistive Technology and Apps for Individual Supports](#).)

Remote Job Development

After the career exploration and discovery processes have been completed, discuss potential job possibilities with the individual, and begin conducting outreach to employers. This is the time to identify existing openings as well as opportunities for job creation and job carving through customized employment.

You'll need to be particularly sensitive to the challenges businesses are dealing with at the current time. However, job development with employers can continue just by finding out what their timelines currently are. More so than ever, a strong customer service approach is important, asking "What are your challenges?" and "How can I help?"

Employers may still be hiring for current openings, or they could be hiring for openings that they foresee having once the pandemic has passed. Ask if the employer is conducting interviews and whether they are doing so remotely. An easy accommodation can be requested to have the interview conducted through the technology platform the individual finds most comfortable.

Working with Individuals on Additional Job Seeking and Employment Support Issues

The following are additional areas you can work with individuals on:

Advocacy

As you work with individuals on identifying their support and accommodation needs, help them advocate for their support needs on the job through role playing, videotaping, and similar strategies. This can include helping individuals understand their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act and other legislation. [Self-Advocacy Online](#) has a wide series of materials and videos, some of which are specific to employment.

Networking

Part of good job exploration and job searching is use of networks. Staff can work with individuals on developing their networking skills, identifying members of their network, and approaching network members to ask for assistance on job exploration. The Institute for Community Inclusion has a comprehensive manual on this topic:

[Teaching Networking Skills: Paving a Way to Jobs and Careers](#).

Résumé development

Work with the individual to create a written résumé using a [standard format or an alternative](#). This can be done online working together through a platform that allows collaboration on a document, such as Google Docs or Microsoft Teams.

Video résumés

Creating a video résumé with a participant can be an exciting and fun experience and can be done remotely. One good resource for this is [Biteable.com](#). This website has several résumé templates, along with the ability to edit and add graphics. [Quik by GoPro](#) is also an easy to use video editor. [This webinar from Employment First Massachusetts](#) provides guidance on development of video résumés.

Developing interview skills

You can practice interview skills with individuals online and on the phone, which can be recorded and reviewed afterwards. A starting point is to role play with the individual. Individuals can also practice interview skills with each other.

Reach out to other agency staff or connect with employers to conduct interview practice activities. After practicing what to say during an interview

by using a list of commonly asked questions, invite someone to remotely interview the individual while recording the interview. Then play it back and give pointers to help the individual progress in terms of interview style, content, and delivery.

Go to the next level and invite an employer to be the interviewer so they can give feedback on what they would want to hear or see in an interview for a given position. Given the extended nature of the pandemic, interviews conducted remotely may become more standard, so it is important to develop these skills.

Soft skills development

Spend time helping individuals assess and increase their soft skills through discussions, exercises, and role plays. [Skills to Pay the Bills](#), developed by the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy, is a curriculum that was developed for youth but can be used with all ages. There is also an [accompanying series of videos](#) and there are many other videos online that can help teach soft skills. In working on soft skills, use role plays, scenarios, and peer-to-peer experiences. Focus on specific areas that will be useful for the individual in the type of job they are interested in.

Hard skills development

While individuals are at home, time can be spent working on developing hard skills that interest them and will help them become successfully employed. One option is to support an individual in taking an online course ([this article from The Muse has an array of options](#)). However, for some individuals, taking an online course will pose significant challenges, due to their level of literacy and accommodation needs. Other options include finding an online instructional video (e.g., cashiering, answering the phone, basic woodworking, how to sweep and vacuum, etc.), viewing it together and discussing afterwards. Another option can be having an expert on a particular skill as a guest, and having them provide instruction.

If possible, work on the skills through modeling and practicing. Think creatively about how the individual can practice these skills while they are at home (e.g., counting money, food preparation, simple automotive maintenance, etc.) either during the meeting or after you have met with them. This may require getting support and assistance from family, residential staff, or housemates. Videotaping the individual

practicing the skill and then reviewing it together can be a good learning experience. Also consider identifying and training the individual on the use of an app that can support them in learning or doing a task.

Attending virtual job fairs

The concept of virtual job fairs has been growing over the last few years, and is likely to grow exponentially with the pandemic. Talk with individuals about whether this is a good option for them, and if so discuss strategies for attending virtual job fairs and how you can support them. [Balance Careers has a Virtual Career Fair FAQ](#), and there are also many additional resources online, including videos.

Remote Job Club

All of the activities above can be done individually. However many of them also can be done as part of a job club with multiple individuals attending. This type of peer-to-peer interaction is generally beneficial, and as individuals are physically isolated, it can be even more important.

Examples of job club activities include soft skills training, practicing interviews, instruction on developing paper and video résumés, advocacy training and employment rights, how to apply for a job, mock interviews, basics of benefits, accommodation and assistive technology resources, and transportation options. General overviews of various career exploration resources can also be part of a job club.

As much as possible, use peer-to-peer activities. For example, have individuals critique each other's video résumés and practice interviews. Have individuals brainstorm together on employment options. Invite external individuals (employers, self-experts, topical experts) as featured speakers. With remote technology, they don't have to be local, and you can even reach out to people in other states or countries. This can include individuals with disabilities who are successfully employed, who can share their experiences.

Spend time with the group to talk in general about how the pandemic and social isolation are impacting them, what they are doing to stay busy, how they are feeling in general, and to address any concerns they have.

Empower individuals to drive the agenda and activities. Also, make it fun, including possibly having some informal social time at the end.

Using Online Materials and Curriculums

There are various online materials and curriculums that can support the provision of employment services and supports remotely. Be thoughtful in using these and consider how they fit in and align with service goals.

- ▶ [Explore Work Curriculum](#). From the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, this curriculum helps self-advocates get more information about employment and become more aware of what it is like to work in the community.
- ▶ [Explore Prepare Act](#). A 14-minute video developed by self-advocates in Massachusetts that is used as part of a curriculum to teach individuals how to find a job.
- ▶ **Materials from Project STIR in Ohio:**
 - [a\) Leadership Training](#)
 - [b\) Training Materials](#)
- ▶ [Materials from the SCILS Group](#). This web page has a wide variety of materials on self-advocacy with support from the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities, including [videos and booklets](#)
- ▶ [Youthhood](#). While designed for youth, portions of this website are useful for individuals of all ages.

Additional Guidelines for Providing Employment Services Remotely

Review where the person is at.

As part of initially working with an individual remotely, review where they are at in terms of the employment process. What person-centered planning, career exploration, and discovery activities have taken place? What has been learned from those activities? How has the pandemic impacted these and should they be revisited?

Have well-designed sessions.

While it is always important to have a plan and clear agenda, when providing remote services this is particularly important. Determine the topics to be covered, the time for each topic, and practice or discussion activities. We all have limits to how much time we can spend communicating online or on the phone, so be sure to have time limits and offer frequent breaks during longer sessions. Also have activities and assignments that individuals can work on between sessions to practice and apply the information discussed.

Create a schedule each week.

In addition to time spent with staff remotely, this schedule can include time for individuals to practice and apply the information discussed, time for doing research and learning on their own, conducting any activities that were assigned for the week, and also time for wellness activities.

Determine what's billable.

A key consideration in providing services remotely is determining what funders will pay for, and doing everything possible to maintain sufficient revenue for program viability. Discuss this issue with your supervisor and review any guidance being provided by funding agencies. Ensure your agency is clearly communicating with funders on how your agency is providing services remotely in a way that is aligned with best practices in terms of employment services and supports.

It is important to recognize the opportunities that a time of challenge creates. It is simply not about treading water until things go back to “normal”. This is chance to experiment in new and different ways in assisting individuals with disabilities to recognize their gifts and talents, and all the possibilities that employment offers. It is chance to create a “new normal” for the long-term.

Ensuring material accessibility.

In creating materials for remote service delivery, it is important that they be as accessible as possible. The [National Center on Accessible Educational Materials](#) is an excellent resource.

Conclusion

After reading this brief, we hope you feel energized to provide employment services remotely, and have some new ideas on fresh ways to deliver those services. Services should only be limited by the creativity of those providing them, not the situations they are delivered under. But it is up to each agency and its staff to be creative so as to fully engage all job seekers in the employment search.

“Creativity involves breaking out of expected patterns in order to look at things in a different way.”

– Edward de Bono, physician, psychologist, author, and inventor

Editorial assistance for this publication provided by Jill Eastman and Anya Weber.

This COVID-19 publication was produced by the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston and funded in part by the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services (DDS) as part of the DDS Employment First initiative, and the Missouri Department of Mental Health as part of the Division of Developmental Disabilities Employment First initiative.

For more information: David Hoff | david.hoff@umb.edu



www.communityinclusion.org | www.employmentfirstMA.org | www.employmentfirstMO.org