

Belonging Matters' Podcast

Transcript

Series 2 Episode 7: Capitalising on Community Capacity, Normative Pathways, and Partnerships to Create Employment

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Welcome to Belonging Matters Podcast, Series Two, Employment. Also available on Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, Spotify, and www.belongingmatters.org. You can email Belonging Matters on info@belongingmatters.org, and please, subscribe and share. Series Two, Episode Seven, "Capitalising on Community Capacity, Normative Pathways, and Partnerships to Create Employment" Bruce Uditsky, M.Ed. is the CEO of Inclusion Alberta, Canada and an Adjunct Professor at the University of Calgary. He is internationally recognised for his leadership and advocacy in social justice

and inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. Bruce is also an author, has consulted in many countries, and is a parent of two adult sons, one of whom has intellectual disabilities.

Anne Hughson, Ph.D., is the Director and an Associate Professor, Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. As a researcher in disability studies and program evaluation, her work is focused on consumer driven services, community inclusion and inclusive education.

In this podcast Bruce and Anne examine in detail employment for people with disabilities revealing the benefits of community engagement and partnerships, and provide two collaboration examples of successful employment for people with disabilities. It was first published as an article by Belonging Matters in their periodical, Issue 29, 'Thinking About...Work'. This episode of the Belonging Matters' Podcast is narrated on behalf of David and Anne by Belonging Matters' Owen Hourigan

Capitalising on Community Capacity, Normative Pathways, and Partnerships to Create Employment

The Current Limits

Early conceptualisations of inclusive (or open) employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities and hope for achieving substantive outcomes, rested with the development and expansion of disability related or supported employment agencies e.g., job coaches, on the job supports together with

the diminishment of sheltered employment, segregated workshops and day programs. The early promising results some decades ago gave reason to believe that the expansion of these employment practices should result in a multiplicative growth in employment outcomes. However, today it is recognised that rates of employment have not grown beyond the 20-30% initial gain. With persistent unemployment rates of 70-80%, the vast majority of adults with intellectual disabilities are destined to experience impoverished, marginalised lives marked by significantly limited income, a reduced array of social relationships and fewer opportunities to be valued contributors in community. Whether looking at hours of work or rate of pay, supported employment outcomes plateaued decades ago!

Some 30 years ago key actors, with working theories, collaborated to rethink why such poor employment outcomes persisted for adolescents and young adults with intellectual disabilities. Central to the thinking was the theory that the means to an inclusive life over the lifespan and across life's many dimensions, rested on the degree to which individuals with intellectual disabilities could be embedded in the normative, inclusive pathways of an ordinary life; pathways ordinarily and powerfully at play in the lives of almost everyone without disabilities. In this brief article, we try to illustrate that maximising the power of inclusive life pathways and describe some key partnerships that have consistently resulted in substantive inclusive employment rates.

We argue that valued and meaningful employment for adults with intellectual disabilities, is more likely achievable when families, from early childhood on, embed their sons and

daughters with intellectual disabilities in the normative career identity pathways naturally forged for individuals without disabilities. This includes embedding individuals with intellectual disabilities in the normative transition to adulthood rather than the typical human service practices that formally design a step by step plan at a specific age to move the person into adult services. Adult services rarely recognise career identity formation that capitalises on an individual's passion and desires, forged first in their family patterns.

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The Possibilities: Community Capacity

Given the number of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the extensive long-standing rates of unemployment, the lack of understanding by most employers of the benefits of hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities and overall societal devaluation, there is no possible way we can see of offsetting these challenges by disability related organisations alone.

Relative to the scope of this challenge, we claim that it is incumbent upon those seeking larger scale social change to focus on how to leverage and benefit from community capacity. Altering the sparse landscape of employment to one where inclusive employment flourishes requires those committed to this end to capitalise on community capacity, normative pathways and partnerships.

Embedding individuals with intellectual disabilities in normative pathways to employment requires an understanding and belief in the inherent capacity of community to be inclusive, possessing significant abilities to provide natural supports. Without this understanding, partnerships are less likely to be realised even with the investment of unfunded time or resources. Even though society can reject and marginalise people with a disability our experience has shown that businesses and post-secondary communities have the capacity to welcome and include individuals as valued classmates and colleagues. This ability is far greater than is commonly understood or capitalised upon.

If the assumption remains that inclusion in open employment is dependent upon a sufficient supply of consistent, qualified paid support staff, such as on-the-job coaches, then the clear majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities will, over the course of their lifetime and across generations, remain forever unemployed. Limited public funding as well as limitations in keeping consistent and qualified staff, means resources must be targeted to capitalise on relationships with people of influence in community and businesses to maximise employment, so that public resources are available to support

those with the most significant disabilities who might never otherwise be employed.

We define community capacity as the existing yet untapped abilities of people, facilities, networks and/or resources in the generic community e.g., a business, university, sports organisation, recreation provider, service club, etc. that can support and enable the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the community. Community capacity may seem vague because it describes an invisible or unknown ability, competency or resource. For multiple reasons many cannot see this capacity because of the culturally transmitted belief that individuals with intellectual disabilities can only be accommodated by professional experts and disability-related programs in some distinct, congregate location. We argue, that once a workplace or community organisation realises it has at least some internal capacity to be inclusive of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the opportunity and the means to enhance or further develop this capacity can emerge. The means to tap and extend capacity is most likely to be realised if sustained relationships are developed between the generic organisation and those, such as Inclusion Alberta, with the experience and means to foster, nurture and acknowledge those relationships over time.

The Examples: Community Capacity Partnerships

What follows are two examples of community capacity whereby adults with intellectual disabilities are embedded in normative pathways and supported by partnerships between a family advocacy organisation and community organisations to

achieve substantively improved employment outcomes. The number of jobs created, increased rates of employment, new types of employment, increased wages and extended length of employment are clear measures of these successes. More extensive materials on the following partnerships, and others, are available by contacting the authors.

Example One: Inclusive Post-Secondary Education

One of the normative and most powerful means to employment for anyone, is access to a post-secondary education. However, it had long been assumed that individuals with intellectual disabilities, and particularly those with severe disabilities, could not be successfully included in regular university/college/polytechnic faculties, courses of study and classes. This assumption, often thought to be a self-evident truth, continues to contribute to the exclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities from one of the most culturally valued and known means to a career and a job. The lack of availability of post-high school inclusion, may mean that quality inclusive schooling is not vigorously pursued, further limiting adult aspirations to seek inclusive employment. Normative pathways of inclusive schooling and post-secondary education are therefore more likely to be abandoned by individuals and their families in favour of congregate life skills training, vocational or employment preparation programs, irrespective of decades of data that report limited outcomes.

The first efforts to fully include individuals with developmental disabilities, including those with severe disabilities, into regular courses and programs of study in a university began over 30

years ago. Believing in the capacity of post-secondary institutions to be inclusive and building intentional partnerships with colleges, technical institutes and universities, we and colleagues in Canada and elsewhere, have been able to demonstrate the value of this fully inclusive approach as a stepping stone to a meaningful and inclusive employment and life in community.

What we initially discovered three decades ago has remained consistently true. In contrast to the continuing struggle to achieve readily offered quality inclusive public schooling, universities and colleges have been overwhelmingly welcoming and inclusive. There has been a vast, largely untapped capacity, from classrooms to co-curricular activities of every kind to engagement in student associations and employment while pursuing studies. We can say with all certainty that the limits of inclusion within post-secondary institutions have yet to be fully explored. In addition, we have consistently had 70-80% of students secure inclusive employment upon the completion of their program of studies.

Theorising that the capacity for post-secondary inclusion will lead to highly positive outcomes, such as employment, has required an intentional approach to establishing relationships within the post-secondary 'world'. In our example, inclusive post-secondary education began by deliberately capitalising on trusted relationships established within two universities. These relationships enabled faculty members to commit to trying an untested idea in environments universally understood to be highly competitive, academic and elite. Credible partnerships built on mutually beneficial goals and expectations have allowed us to sustain and expand inclusive

post-secondary education to 20 out of 26 post-secondary institutions in Alberta.

Inclusive post-secondary education, as practiced by Inclusion Alberta, allies in Canada and elsewhere, relies on inclusive education facilitators located on campuses offering support to faculty, facilitating the development of relationships between students with and without disabilities, and enabling the participation of students with intellectual disabilities in post-secondary campus life. To be clear, while support in class is provided by non-disabled peers, the number of students with intellectual disabilities being included has been limited by the funding for educational facilitators, typically one facilitator for three students.

However, in a constant and conscious effort to advance the quality of inclusive post-secondary education and ensure a greater degree of sustainability, we have extended existing partnerships by developing a faculty focused enterprise with the hope of deepening the commitment of faculty members, improving their teaching practice and increasing their capacity to include students without additional inclusive educational facilitators. Having carefully created and sustained relationships with senior post-secondary leaders, including presidents, vice-presidents and deans, we were able to gain their support for an initiative to provide teaching strategies to faculty to enhance their accommodation of students with intellectual disabilities. The program offered interested faculties information on ways to modify and adapt instruction to better include and engage learners with intellectual disabilities in their courses. The program was open to faculty who had previously included students with intellectual disabilities or might be

interested in doing so in the future. Funding was secured for faculty to have the time to attend the training. The faculty reported that the program was of value to them for all of their students, not just those students with intellectual disabilities. Plus, the capacity for more students to be included on the participating campuses, without additional paid supports, was increased.

While there are other factors that contribute to students' employment success, including being supported in summer jobs, employment outcomes now remain approximately 80% on average.

Example Two: Rotary Employment Partnership

Social networks have many proven benefits, including being a significant factor in securing employment. Most individuals without disabilities find employment through their social networks – “through someone who knows someone” – more than any other avenue including searching job postings. As most individuals with intellectual disabilities have limited social networks, they do not have access to this normative and powerful pathway to employment. Here is one way, we argue, that it is possible to utilise the social network capacity of others in the interests of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Rotary is an international organisation with over a million plus members who belong to over 30,000 clubs that meet weekly. Rotarians are often business leaders and owners, professionals, and managers, who come together to make a difference locally and globally on the basis of their vocation and other interests. They are typically well connected

community members with well-established business, professional and social networks. Each week a great many Rotary Clubs have a brief presentation from an organisation seeking support, typically financial, for a community or global cause. When Inclusion Alberta was given the opportunity to approach a Rotary Club for support, it could have proceeded as most everyone else does. This typically means making a presentation on the importance of our work and the need for funding. We may or may not have been successful in this request but a positive result would still have been limited in time and effect.

Instead, applying the theories of community capacity (business leaders with extensive connections) and normative pathways (access to social networks), we saw a substantial and untapped means, that has now led to the creation of over 460 individual and inclusive jobs. To realise the possibility of creating a sustained partnership that capitalised on Rotarians viable social networks, we took a substantial amount of time to meet Rotarians, attend Rotary meetings, appreciate the history of Rotary, understand its culture and learn its structure. In effect, we took the time to determine the most likely means by which a partnership could be forged to engage those who identify as Rotarians to personally make a substantive difference in the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Becoming real partners would require trust and confidence, if Rotarians were to willingly consider their own enterprises as a means of creating employment opportunities by hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, trust and confidence in the partnership was required if Rotarians were going to be willing to approach their friends and colleagues

with a request to create jobs and hire individuals with intellectual disabilities. We wanted a partnership that would continue over time and result in Rotarians being able to express the value of hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities based on their own personal experiences.

Establishing this form of partnership, organisation to organisation in contrast to a service provider model of seeking a job placement within a company, requires an understanding not commonly held in disability service provision. It necessitates a commitment of time and effort, from the senior members of the partnering organisation which is rarely funded or considered to be of value by funders. Government funding for employment efforts often focuses on job numbers, irrespective of the quality, length of employment, opportunities for advancement, relationships in the workplace or connection of a job to an individual's interests. However, these are exactly the outcomes our community partners are invested and interested in achieving. Inclusion Alberta has made sustained efforts, over lengthy periods of time, to grow the partnership. We now have partnerships in multiple communities, with dozens of clubs, hundreds of Rotarians and two Rotary Districts.

One of the fascinating attributes of partnering with a service organisation established more than a century ago, is that as long as there are Rotarians and Inclusion Alberta as a partner willing to work to maintain and solidify that partnership, individuals with intellectual disabilities will have a continuous, non-exhaustive means of job generation. That is, in addition to currently engaged Rotarians who extend their social networks, there will be incoming new Rotarians, who will also replace

departing Rotarians, bringing new social networks with new employment opportunities. We theorise that the continuous participation of Rotarians helping to create inclusive and meaningful employment opportunities then becomes embedded in the culture of the partnership, such that new Rotarians will find it natural to be engaged in creating jobs through their business and social relationships. There are few other examples of a partnership of more than 10 years standing that can claim to be as effective in creating a continuous and voluntary source of job possibilities by capitalising on the social networks of business community members.

Replication

Inclusive post-secondary education partnerships and the Rotary Employment Partnership are two examples that exemplify theories about community capacity and normative pathways as powerful ideas that can be applied to achieving inclusive employment and community membership. This approach is now being used by Inclusion Alberta to create employment opportunities for high school youth with intellectual disabilities by working in partnership with their non-disabled peers, families, high schools, Rotarians and the business community. Inclusive paid employment outside of school hours is a more effective means of ensuring post-school employment than work experience during school hours, particularly if unpaid and non-inclusive. More recently, Inclusion Alberta has established partnerships with local

governments and their unionised staff to hire individuals with intellectual disabilities in significant numbers.

We think the two examples help to illustrate the importance of getting to know the culture of each of the community partners, understanding how they see themselves as contributing while also experiencing the benefits that accrue from their efforts. Faculty members almost all report they gained more from the experience of teaching an inclusive course than they offered and post-secondary administrators take pride in their institutions observable commitment to principles they espouse but have not always realised! Rotarians know businesses across Alberta are benefiting from the work and commitment of employees with intellectual disabilities.

Inclusive post-secondary education, Rotary Employment Partnerships, youth employment partnerships and local government partnerships are just a few examples of how lives can be changed by capitalising on community capacity, embedding individuals with intellectual disabilities in normative pathways over time and by building effective partnerships.

As examples, they are instructive, to figuring out how to apply these concepts across contexts. It appears to us that a family organisation committed to inclusion, with a principal interest in enabling inclusive and meaningful lives over the lifespan and embedding people in their own communities, may have more of the elements necessary for the “right” relationships than realised.

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