

***NATURAL SUPPORTS:  
A DELICATE BALANCING ACT***

***A White Paper by Michael Callahan***

The concept of natural supports is closely linked to TASH and its mission. In 1988 TASH members Jan Nisbet and Dave Hagner wrote the watershed article that appeared in the *TASH Journal*: “Natural supports in the workplace: A reexamination of supported employment.” This article basically introduced the concept of natural supports to the disability field. In the years following the introduction of natural supports, the concept went viral. By 1992 Congress accepted natural supports as a means for providing ongoing supports for supported employment. In 1998 Paul Wehman and John Bricout analyzed nine journal articles describing varying approaches and functional definitions of natural supports. Unfortunately, they found confusion brewing within the variation.

From the beginning, it seemed that those associated with developing strategies for natural supports confused the issue of developing creative and non-professionalized supports with the concept of accessing and utilizing the natural features of workplaces for support to people with significant disabilities. Wehman and Bricout detailed article after article, including the definition used by Congress to amend the Rehab Act in 1992, in which natural supports referred to creative strategies to be developed by human service agencies rather than utilizing the actual natural supports available in community workplaces. Many of the early articles described ways to minimize the role of the job coach by finding innovative strategies to access supports from an array of sources such as mentors, parents, advocates, college students and workers from other shifts. These approaches shared the common feature of expanding access to non-traditional supporters under the name of natural supports.

As the concept matured during the mid to late 1990’s, there was a clear shift towards defining natural supports in terms of the workplace rather than in terms of alternatives to traditional job coaching . One article (West, et. al. 1997) got it just right. These authors suggested that natural supports “refers to the resources inherent in community environments that can be used for habilitative and supportive services.”

In following this perspective, effective natural supports must try to balance two powerful forces that affect the success of anyone using integrated community environments – features of naturalness and individual needs. In other words, it’s not enough to simply gain access to naturally existing features of support. We must also assure that the needs of the individual are met. But how do we strike this balance? And which side of the issue do we start with – naturalness or individual? How do we build capacity in community environments to more effectively meet the needs of individuals with significant disabilities? The answers to these tough questions are complex and have been left almost completely to support agency staff – often young and inadequately trained – to find their way to naturally referenced success. It is fair to say that we’ve not been extremely successful in our efforts to increase natural supports in community environments.

In the decade and a half since Wehman and Bricout analyzed the state of the art surrounding natural supports, there has been a marked decline in training and scholarly development in this area. Employment has continued to be the focus of most discussion

on natural supports although the concept is equally valid during community participation, in one's neighborhood, in school and in post-secondary settings. However, the realm of employment seems to offer the clearest avenue for understanding the complexities of accessing the "resources inherent in community environments."

Successful facilitation of employment for persons with disabilities requires a balancing act of two perspectives which are often at odds in community workplaces -- the general decisions made by employers regarding the support given to their employees and the specific needs of individual workers. Traditionally the human service field has assumed that the needs of workers with disabilities, especially employees with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities, could not be adequately met by employers. Therefore most training and facilitation strategies have evolved from a human service perspective rather than from a more naturally defined source. However, employment facilitators have begun to recognize the possible contributions of employers, if they are included fully in supported employment, and the limiting effects on integration and full participation, if they are excluded from the process.

### **THE SEVEN PHASE SEQUENCE**

This evolved understanding of natural supports dovetailed with that of Marc Gold (1980), a pioneer in the areas of training and employment. Gold suggested a systematic approach to teaching individuals who found it difficult to learn tasks by creating a model known as the Seven Phase Sequence as a part of this Try Another Way training. Marc Gold & Associates (the consulting organization founded by Marc Gold) later extended that model to address the challenges of developing natural supports (Callahan & Garner, 1997). This sequence represents a conceptual model to balance the natural support capacity of community workplaces with the individual needs of employees with significant disabilities. The Seven Phase Sequence provides a culturally-based road map to be used by human service employment supporters to maximize natural supports and to balance the complex issues raised by the impact of disability.

The first four steps of the Seven Phase Sequence clearly indicate a strong preference for using natural processes to assist supported employees to learn and maintain their jobs. This strategy, and the accompanying job analysis activity to be performed, requires the employment facilitator to carefully examine and utilize all the features of "natural capacity" that exist in a workplace to assist all employees to learn and perform their jobs.

**(Insert Seven Phase graphic here)**

The backup phases of the Sequence are designed to provide whatever additional assistance may be necessary, in as natural manner as possible, to teach the task in those cases in which the natural procedures are not sufficient. Employment facilitators are faced with providing creative and effective suggestions in Phases 5 - 7 to supplement the natural supports available on a job site. In some cases it may be necessary for the employment facilitator to completely take over the instructional responsibility for an employee, depending on the circumstances faced in each unique work culture.

This perspective results in a new role for employment facilitators and raises difficult questions regarding technical assistance and staff competence. For instance, how can a facilitator offer creative solutions if he/she does not know powerful training techniques? How can a facilitator expect to effectively teach an employee who finds it extremely difficult to learn if the facilitator does not have knowledge of effective strategies which can be individually tailored to meet the needs the employee? The answers require a balanced approach.

## **THE BALANCING ACT**

These questions create a paradox for employment facilitators and their service agencies. Facilitators need to reference and support natural procedures and relationships whenever feasible and they need to be able to go beyond natural capacity, at times, to offer employees with severe disabilities access to necessary skills and relationships.

Perhaps the first key to resolving this dilemma is for the employment facilitator to recognize that there are limits to natural supports and natural capacity. Well-trained employment facilitators will usually have skills and perspectives to meet individual employee needs that are more technically effective than those found in typical employees and supervisors. However, there are many things that human service facilitators can never do as well as "natural" people on job sites. Those natural contributions often relate to the most critically important aspects of success.

Employment facilitators must therefore recognize that even though they need to possess a range of skills to insure their employee's success, those skills serve a secondary, backup role to the ways, means, and people natural to the job site. However, unless the facilitator knows powerful training and facilitation strategies to augment natural features, the employee's success can be compromised.

The Seven Phase Sequence provides a clear direction to employment facilitators to initiate instruction using the natural ways, means, and people available to any new employee. However, this is not a lockstep model. The facilitator must carefully weigh the features of naturalness, by using the first three steps of the Seven Phase Sequence, in relation to the needs of the individual. Unless there is compelling evidence otherwise, the facilitator should proceed to support, not substitute for, the natural processes of the job site for initial instruction.

## **THE SEVEN PHASE SEQUENCE IN ACTION**

The activity of implementing the plans and decisions made during the Seven Phase Sequence is the first step of a process which is critically important to the success of persons in supported employment. This process involves supporting the direct facilitation of training by natural supporters or providing direct training of the supported employee by the facilitator, as appropriate. The decision of *who* will provide the initial assistance and

how the job will be taught and the *manner* it is to be performed is covered in Phases 1, 2 and 3 of the Sequence.

This implementation begins on the initial day of employment for the supported employee (or possibly during a negotiated orientation period) and continues until all the necessary job routines have been learned by the employee. Additionally, the facilitator must insure that the culture of the setting is translated to the employee.

## THE NATURAL PHASES

The first three phases of the Seven Phase Sequence provide all the information necessary for the facilitator to consider the features of naturalness which might be used to provide support and direction assisting the employee to successfully perform the job.

**Phase 1** references the **natural ways** in which job tasks are performed in work settings. Natural ways include methods of performance for targeted job tasks, the culture of workplace, the manner in which workers interact, the managerial style of the setting, and all other natural features which describe the unique characteristics of performance and behavior desired by the employer.

This phase is crucial because it provides the information necessary for the new employee to "fit in". Employees who perform their jobs in a manner similar to others not only are more likely to be accepted "as one of us", it will also be easier for supervisors and co-workers to provide assistance and troubleshoot problems due to the similarity of performance with their jobs.

**Phase 2** requires facilitators to examine the **natural means** used by employers to communicate the natural ways desired for employee performance and behavior. This concept concentrates primarily on the teaching strategies used by employers to introduce new employees to their jobs and to support them when they need assistance and upgrading. A troubling aspect of this phase is the possibility, or even the likelihood that the means used to teach and support employees will vary from person to person in the work site and the approaches may be unstructured and ineffective. Training procedures will certainly vary among work sites in any community.

Perhaps the most effective way to assess the natural means of job sites is to, first, ask the employer to describe the procedures used. Second, observe, if possible, teaching done by employees in the setting. Finally, and most importantly, ask to be taught how to perform the job tasks by the persons who would naturally assist the jobs to be performed by the supported employee. This approach will provide the employment facilitator with a valid perspective from which to make later decisions in the sequence.

**Phase 3** asks facilitators to identify and enlist the **natural people** who typically support new employees to perform their job tasks. This activity is possibly the most novel aspect of natural supports for traditional providers of supported employment services. In the

past, job developers often promised employers that job coaches would provide all the assistance necessary for successful performance and that the employer would have little or no responsibility in the initial training and support of the employee. This practice resulted in the isolation of supported employees within their own work settings. The job coach often acted as an interpreter for all the information, rules, policies and activities of the work place for the supported employee. This role placed the job coach *between* the employer and the employee.

The Seven Phase Sequence asks employment facilitators to get to know all the different people who are responsible, or who may be willing, to provide assistance to new employees and to enlist those persons to provide training and support for the new supported employee.

### **FACILITATING SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE**

**Phase 4** involves the provision of initial and on-going assistance to the supported employee. All the information gained during the first three phases, and in the Job Analysis (described later), is considered in the implementation of this phase. Facilitators must now decide the degree of naturalness which will be used for initial training. *It is strongly suggested that unless there are clear indications to the contrary, that natural procedures be utilized from the beginning.*

If the facilitator has decided to follow the sequence and allow natural supporters to initiate instruction, it is necessary to plan a strategy to observe the training and to be in a position to offer suggestions and support. This requires the facilitator to be physically present at the job site during this initial period. Depending upon the factors determined during the first three phases of the sequence and the job analysis, the facilitator may choose a range of positions varying from a discreet observation point to close proximity to the employee.

Plans also must be considered to offer feedback and suggestions to natural supporters. Depending on the needs of the employee and the capacity of the employer, the most appropriate strategy for feedback will vary -- as with positioning of the facilitator. It may be necessary to offer almost immediate feedback in some instances, while in others every hour or even longer may be appropriate. When significant problems arise, the facilitator should implement the back-up phase of the sequence for more individualized attention for the supported employee.

#### *Constraints to the Initial Use of Naturalness*

There might be several situations in which a facilitator would consider less natural procedures to initiate Phase 4. Often the roles of the job developer and the employment facilitator are performed by different persons. The job developer may indicate to the employer that the employment facilitator will perform all the initial instruction of the supported employee. In this case the facilitator often finds it necessary to initiate training, involving the natural supporters as much as possible, then fade to them as training allows.

It is therefore critical that job development reflects the values for natural supports imbedded in the Seven Phase Sequence.

There may also be instances relating to the specific impact of an employee's disability in which the facilitator may feel that it is necessary to model effective techniques for the natural supporters, for example, in the areas of systematic instruction or behavioral interventions, as a way to teach successful strategies.

Additionally there may be situations that are so fragile in relation to the employer's low expectation of success, or of the employee's or the family's low expectations, that the facilitator might feel that a period of greater instructional control is called for than is available from natural procedures.

Finally, work areas and job sites may require modifications to assure accessibility and productivity for employees with physical disabilities. These modifications are often best made *before* an employee begins work. The employment facilitator however, should always include the employer in the solutions to these needs rather than assuming the responsibility independently of the employment setting.

### **MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS: USING THE BACK-UP PHASES**

It is important to realize that regardless of who provides the initial training of the supported employee -- natural supporters or the job coach -- it is likely that there will be adjustments to be made to the features of naturalness identified in Phases 1, 2 and 3. This is to say that the job coach as a facilitator should not depend on initial strategies and decisions to be sufficient in facilitating successful employment. During the early days of employment, facilitators must constantly monitor the performance of the supported employee. If initial strategies are not successful, then the back-up phases of the Seven Phase Sequence must be implemented.

Possibly the most significant contribution of the Seven Phase Sequence is its safety net. Rather than blaming performance problems on the employee or the employer, the sequence asks employment facilitators to consider utilizing increasingly powerful strategies to achieve successful performance. Phases 5, 6, and 7 represent a logical closed loop of decisions which encourage the facilitator to remain positively focused until the employee learns the job.

**Phase 5** involves supporting or possibly substituting for the natural people who are responsible for teaching job tasks. The facilitator *must* be present on the job site to successfully make this and many other back-up decisions. There are only a few ways in which the availability of natural people on a job site can be negotiated. The immediate inclination is likely to be for the job coach to offer to substitute for the availability of the natural person. However, we recommend that facilitators try to connect this availability

with typical situations in the work setting. Ask, “What do you do when the supervisor of an untrained employee is called away to a meeting?” Or ask, “Has it ever happened that a new employee’s mentor is unavailable for support?” If so, “What do you do during these situations?” In other words, try to frame the issue as a workplace problem rather than as a disability issue. Of course the job coach can always step in to substitute, but first try to assist the business to address the challenge naturally.

The decisions made during **Phase 6** involve a reconsideration of the natural means used by employers to teach and motivate employees to perform their jobs. It is likely that many work places will not have a single approach to teaching and motivating, but rather a hodgepodge of approaches individually determined by each co-worker and supervisor. Facilitators must be careful, therefore, not to generalize too much in this area. The teaching style of one co-worker may differ significantly from another and further yet from a supervisor. In these cases, it is important to consider those various strategies which seem to be working and who uses them. It may be necessary then to offer specific suggestions to specific natural supporters -- each different from the other -- in order to achieve successful performance. A number of strategies might work in Phase 6: a) demonstrate a more successful technique, b) negotiate a time for discussion and feedback with the natural supporter, c) offer training information formally or informally to natural supporters, or, d) shadow the natural supporter and offer on-going feedback.

**Phase 7** decisions involve adapting, modifying or negotiating for flexibility in the natural ways that workplace tasks are performed. Natural ways most often reference task methods but can be expanded to include concerns like sitting/standing, work area design, employee dress and rules and other larger issues. These decisions are logically considered last because they are often the most consistent and unchanging features of work places. Job coaches must always get permission and employer input before making adaptation and modifications to natural ways. It is necessary, in some instances to negotiate for changes in this area even before the employee begins employment. For example, if the natural way to get paper for a copier in an office is to reach up into the storage cabinet to retrieve the paper, a modification would be immediately necessary for an employee who uses a wheelchair and has limited reach. These negotiations occur between Phases 3 and 4.

## **MAKING CHANGES THROUGH THE “LENS” OF THE WORKPLACE**

As the Seven Phase Sequence is put into motion, it is critical that job coaches make suggestions “through the lens of the workplace” rather than unilaterally, at the point of the problem. In this way, we create the opportunity to build natural capacity rather than simply solving workplace issues. This effort is represented in the model (see Seven Phase Sequence model) by the arrows that return to the features of the workplaces culture, Phases 1 – 3, rather than to Phase 4. The importance of this subtlety is huge. If job coaches solve workplace problems in Phase 4 only, the workplace loses the benefit of the solution. However, if job coaches attempt to address issues by engaging the business as if the problem is a workplace issue than simply a disability issue, the business has an

opportunity to grow and build capacity. This is an essential outcome of the use of this strategy.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF JOB ANALYSIS**

Job analysis in supported employment is a human service activity designed to assist facilitators to: a) organize the information to be performed by the supported employee; b) recognize the natural ways, means and people used by the employer to typically perform and teach the job; c) develop a plan for balancing the natural features of support available at the job site with the needs of the employee; and d) form the relationships and perspective necessary to accomplish the seven phase sequence.

This activity formally begins *after* the employer has given approval for the job to begin and *before* the supported employee begins to work. However, the job analysis begins informally even before the job developer's initial contact with the employer. In order to achieve the maximum benefits of natural supports, facilitators must seek to identify factors of natural capacity as a consideration of accepting a job offer. Care must be taken to set the scene for employer involvement from the onset of employment and to distinguish this naturally-referenced approach from more traditional approaches of supported employment.

Due to changes in the way supported employment has evolved and constraints in funding, job analysis is rarely performed today. Most job coaches meet the supported employee and spend their first day in the workplace on the employee's first day of work. This reality creates a "sink or swim" mentality that allows little time for observation, reflection and planning of strategies to maximize natural supports. The investment of several hours of time prior to the first day of work can pay huge dividends for naturally referenced job site supports.

## **CONCLUSION**

The reason that the employment facilitator's role remains critical to success is the continuing reality that many persons with severe disabilities require supports, beyond those typically offered by employers, to be successfully employed. At this time, the funding and responsibility for the provision of these supports rest with human service agencies. The use of natural supports does not imply that human service supports are counter-productive, but that they are best used to develop and enhance more natural supports.

The usefulness of this approach to building natural supports depends on the employment facilitator creating a "chain of logic" throughout the process which results in the maximum use of natural conditions and supports while meeting the individual needs of the supported employee – achieving a successful balance. The Seven Phase Sequence offers a logical road map for job coaches and job developers to follow throughout the delivery of job site supports. Job coaches, like most human service support personnel, are rarely given clear

directions to assist individuals to reach their goals. A strategy such as this sequence can offer the clarity needed to maximize the use of natural features of support and to build effectiveness in community workplaces.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this approach is that it asks supporters to take a degree of risk in using naturally referenced strategies as a starting point in favor of more powerful human service referenced strategies. But not in an absolute way in that we now need to leave those human service referenced approaches behind but, rather, as an attempt to bring balance and logic to the effort to assist natural environments to be more willing and successful in the support of individuals with significant disabilities.

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# The Seven Phase Sequence The Complete "Roadmap"

