

# What I would want my job coach to know and do -

by Michael W. Smull

(While listening to a gathering of job coaches in Wisconsin I began to think of all of the things that people with disabilities have taught me about what they want their job coach to know and what they want their job coach to do. Some of what follows I learned from 10 years as a community service provider, much of it I learned from listening as I have been doing person centered planning with people from all over North America. The following list of requests represents a summary of what I have been told - with words and behavior.)

## **Understand how I want to live.**

I know that you are only responsible for helping me with work, but what I do for work has to fit with how I want to live. Please do not divide my life into compartments. Listen to what I say about the rest of life. If I cannot speak for myself, talk to the people who support me where I live. If I am moving to a community job from a workshop or day program, remember that I may be leaving all my friends and someone needs to help me stay in touch with them.

## **Understand the role of work in my life.**

What work means to me may be different from what work means to you. Work may be how I get status, it may define who I am. What I do may be more important than how much I earn. Alternatively, work may be what I do so that I can afford what I enjoy. Or the role of work may be some mix of status and income. Regardless of whether or not I can put this into words, you need to make an effort to understand the role of work in my life.

## **Learn about my dreams/desires, gifts and capacities.**

You need to know what I am good at in order to find me a job where I can be successful. You also need to find out what my "fantasy" or perfect job would be. The job that I would really like may not be where I score the highest on your assessments. Help me get a job that I want. If the "perfect job" is beyond my grasp see how close you can help me get.

**Do not "place" me, offer me a job that you think will make sense for me.**

Even if it took you six months to develop a job, it ought to be OK for me to say no. Part of respecting me is respecting my decisions. At the same time, if I need encouragement to try something new, if saying no is my way of saying I am scared, encourage me but do not coerce me.

**Do not try to make me "independent".**

Help me learn the skills that I will need to do the job. Help my co-workers learn how I learn and how to support me. Help me get to know my co-workers and to have reciprocal relationships with them. The result for you may be that I am more independent of the system. The result I want is the interdependence that all of us have.

**Help me become part of my work place.**

Help my co-workers meet me (and get to know me) as a person rather than as a disability. Show them by your example. (They will learn more from how you treat me than they will from what you tell them.) Work on talking about me using respectful, people first language. Use language that empowers me. This will tell my co-workers that I am somebody that they should respect. Learn the culture and the "positive rituals" of the work place. Help me enter the culture and participate in the positive rituals. Remember that your planning meetings may not help me be seen as a co-worker.

**Be there if I need help because of challenges in other parts of my life, or changes at work.**

Things that happen at home may affect my work. If people leave my life (e.g. family members who move, are hospitalized, or die; residential staff who leave) I may have problems doing my work. I will need support and understanding, I may need some time off and/or counseling. Remember that I may like my job because of who I work with. When people who are important to me leave my work place, be ready to help me.

**Keep listening to my words (and behavior) for requests for change - a change in responsibilities, supervision, pay, or where I work.**

Just like any other worker, I may get tired of my routine. I may no longer find my job satisfying or enjoyable. I may want a raise. Because of how my co-workers and I relate to each other, I may need to change who I work with. I may want a complete change - in who I work for, what I do, and where I work. Changes like these require that you take into account the local job market, but please help me make the changes as I want them and when I want them. Change should occur on my schedule, not on yours. I may not want to wait for my next planning meeting.

**Help me find new jobs as I want/need them.**

This is important enough to mention twice. My experience is that if I complain about my job I get counseling. If I act out my unhappy feelings I get a behavior program. I can only get a new job by really screwing up the old job. Please help me build the kind of job history that you want to have. Let me build on success. Help me find new jobs as often (and as seldom) as I ask for them.

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