

The Role of Occupational Therapy in Facilitating Employment of Individuals With Developmental Disabilities

What Are Developmental Disabilities?

Developmental disabilities are defined as severe, lifelong disabilities that are attributable to a mental and/or physical impairment, manifested before age 22 years, that are likely to continue indefinitely. These impairments result in substantial functional limitations in three or more areas of major life activity (Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, 2000).

In the United States, people with disabilities who are capable of working and are actively seeking employment are almost twice as likely to be unemployed as individuals without disabilities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). Occupational therapy practitioners can facilitate work opportunities in varied ways, such as through individual competitive work, supported employment at sheltered workshops, enclaves, mobile work crews, and transitional employment. With an appropriate job match, those with developmental disabilities can flourish in the open job market or within supported work options.



The Role of OT in Facilitating Work Skills

Occupational therapy practitioners have specialized knowledge and skills in optimizing worker performance and promoting safety and health in the workplace, including minimizing the risk of work-related musculoskeletal disorders. Therapists evaluate the work environment, the job task(s), and the individual's skills to identify the potential barriers to and supports for successful job performance. The goal is to facilitate a match between the worker, the task(s), and the environment. For a successful match, an occupational therapist can evaluate the following components of job(s)

- *Physical:* Refers to such demands as postural and positional requirements (i.e., standing, squatting); external force requirements (i.e., lifting weight, grip and pinch forces); limb and dexterity requirements; physiological requirements; duration of the work shift; and amount of time activities are performed.
- *Cognitive:* Includes areas such as memory, ability to learn, problem solving capabilities, and intuitive thought processes.
- *Social, Behavioral, Emotional:* Refers to the accepted social processes and interactions required to perform the job duties, and includes emotional regulation, communication, monitoring safety of self and/or others, initiative (the ability to self-start), and management of others.
- *Contextual:* Refers to the varied environments and situations in which the task(s) occurs.

Providing Supports in the Workplace

As persons with developmental disabilities explore their work options, occupational therapy practitioners can assist by completing prevocational or vocational assessments, job analyses, and other functional evaluations. To promote successful employment, the individual is matched to a job classification for which he or she has the physical, cognitive, and behavioral/emotional capabilities to perform within all required contexts and environments. In addition, adaptive equipment or techniques can be used within many job functions to facilitate performance by

someone with a disability. To prepare students for the transition from high school to employment, occupational therapy practitioners may work as part of an interdisciplinary team within school- or community-based programs. Occupational therapy practitioners are often instrumental in addressing skills that go beyond what is necessary to succeed in school to include success in finding and keeping a job after graduation.

The following are some of the ways in which occupational therapy practitioners may facilitate employment:

- Evaluate and address sensory, motor, and perceptual abilities of the person as part of a prevocational/vocational needs assessment, or ongoing support for a work-study program.
- Evaluate the work site for the sensory, motor, and perceptual requirements of specific work tasks, along with environmental factors such as noise, clutter, and the distance to the closest bathroom.
- Match the client's abilities and interests with specific job requirements, then fabricate needed supports (e.g., wider handles for gripping tools, noise-reducing headphones, a nonslip surface, daily checklist).
- Determine accessibility and safety of the work area and recommend adaptive equipment.
- Perform a task analysis of job requirements and outline the components into a sequence. A written script ensures that multiple helpers (e.g., job coaches, therapists, special educators) all follow the same sequence when working with the individual.
- Create programs for skill development needed for job performance (e.g., improving standing tolerance and finger dexterity, developing or refining social skills).
- Develop and implement programs and adaptations for independence in daily activities required for work-readiness, such as toileting, grooming, and eating meals in a socially appropriate manner.
- Recommend access options for communication systems or a communication (or other technology) device, possibly in collaboration with the speech-language pathologist.
- Explore job possibilities not previously identified by the employer or work-study coordinator.
- Assist with return to work after an injury or illness, or adapt to changing needs due to chronic or progressive conditions.

Occupational therapy practitioners can also assist individuals with developmental disabilities to transition to retirement communities and new jobs if desired; and with maintaining health, wellness, and social participation as they age.

Conclusion

Occupational therapy practitioners play an important role in assisting individuals with developmental disabilities to successfully engage in work tasks and participate in meaningful work roles across the lifespan.

References

Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, 42 U.S.C. § 15002 (2000).

U.S. Department of Labor. (2014, June 11). Persons with a disability: Labor force characteristics summary. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>

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Occupational therapy enables people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—injury, illness, or disability. By looking at the whole picture—a client's psychological, physical, emotional, and social make-up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence, and participate in the everyday activities of life.

