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Minnesota Diversified Industries

Innovative Employment Project

Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

Innovative Employment

Minnesota Diversified Industries' (MDI) vision is to provide meaningful employment opportunities for all people with disabilities. Through the Innovative Employment Project, funded by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), MDI facilitated innovative employment options, through training, placement, and outreach to increase competitive, integrated employment (CIE) for persons with disabilities who live in Minneapolis, Cohasset, Deer River, Grand Rapids, and surrounding areas. The two-year project ran in 2016 through 2018.

The goals of the Innovative Employment Project were:

1. To implement customized employment training and innovative placement strategies to improve the employment outcomes of adults with disabilities in integrated community settings;
2. To build relationships by providing information and incentives to business entities to expand competitive, integrated employment opportunities for persons with disabilities;
3. To work with employers to develop new positions and implement job support strategies (including the use of technology) to increase employment options, including competitive, customized, or self-employment; and
4. To partner with Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) to maintain consumer records, collect data, document services (in compliance with applicable federal and state regulations), and conduct ongoing project evaluation, reporting, and improvement.

Project activities and highlights include:

- Person-centered practices training for 45 staff, family, and support team members
- Supported employment training for MDI's employment services team
- Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators certification) training for three MDI staff members (ACRE)
- Access to online College of Employment Services (CES)
- Customized training and technical assistance for placement specialists and leadership
- Formative and summative project evaluation

Each of these project goals and activities support MDI's mission of serving people with disabilities by offering inclusive employment opportunities and services while providing new insights into future employment services and supports.

Leadership at MDI recognizes there is much to be done to address the challenges of employing individuals with disabilities in rural communities. Staffing limitations, the local economy and culture, and employers doing business close to the edge of their profit margins are identified challenges. Enthusiasm at MDI continues to be sparked by new ideas and through the use of new tools that can be used to support job seekers and employers. As a result of the Innovative Employment Project, employment services team members report feeling better prepared to apply their new learning around customized employment and other innovative placement strategies. One team member shared, "Generating genuine excitement and hope in job seekers was definitely one of the most rewarding experiences for me during this project."

Purpose of the Project

The landscape for supporting individuals with disabilities seeking employment is continually evolving. While policies and legislation in Minnesota and beyond identify employment for people with disabilities as a priority, expectations for full inclusion and workforce participation are increasing. As a result more programs and services are focused on increasing competitive, integrated employment for individuals with disabilities. The Innovative Employment Project's mission is to provide innovative employment options to advance community integration for persons with disabilities who live in Minneapolis, Cohasset, Deer River, Grand Rapids, and the surrounding areas of Minnesota.

MDI's key project objectives included: 1) Implement customized employment training and innovative placement strategies that improve the employment outcomes of adults with disabilities in integrated community settings; 2) Build relationships by providing information and incentives to business entities to expand competitive, integrated employment opportunities for persons with disabilities; 3) Work with employers to develop new positions and implement job support strategies (including the use of technology) to increase employment options, including competitive, customized, or self-employment; and 4) Partner with Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) to maintain consumer records, collect data, document services (in compliance with applicable federal and state regulations), and conduct

ongoing project evaluation, reporting, and improvement.

MDI has provided employment services for communities in Minnesota since 1964. The founders were forward thought leaders who believed every individual with a disability should have the

opportunity to contribute to society as a part of their personal identity, dignity, and self-sufficiency. Today, MDI supports the implementation of the Minnesota Olmstead Plan and the Employment First Policy by ensuring that people with disabilities have choices for

Figure 1: Project Design

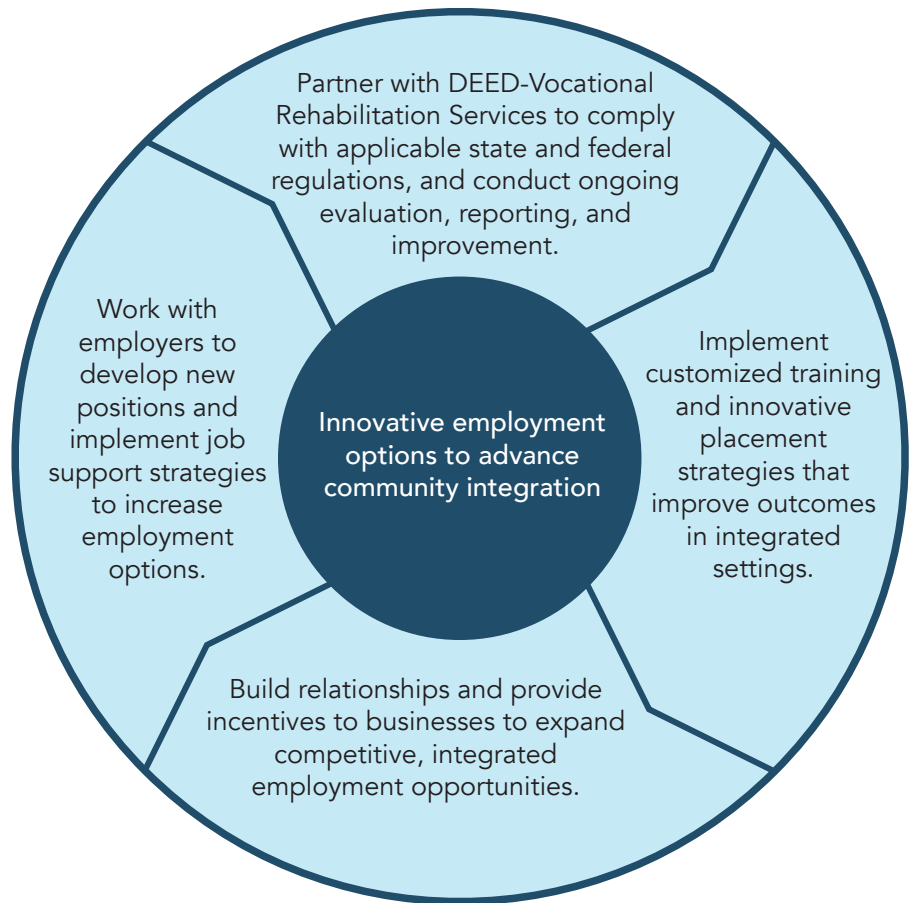


Figure 2. Project Plan



competitive, meaningful, and sustained employment in the most integrated setting possible. In addition, this project supports Minnesota's implementation of the Workforce Initiative Opportunity Act (WIOA) by improving employment services for job seekers with disabilities and by assisting employers in finding employees with the skills to meet their business needs. Leadership at MDI shared, "It is all about offering choice, supporting independence and economic well-being, increasing opportunities for inclusion, and highlighting the skills and talents of employees."

This project report outlines the role of training, mentoring, and technical assistance played in meeting the project objectives.

Project Design

The term of this project was 24 months, beginning in 2016 and ending on December 31, 2018. The target audience was defined as MDI employees in Cohasset - Hired Hands (HH) and Grand Rapids.

Evaluation Plan

MDI contracted with the Institute on Community Integration (ICI) at the

University of Minnesota to develop and implement a comprehensive evaluation plan. The plan included standardized tracking of the project's deliverables and resulted in this evaluation report. The evaluation included examining the following areas:

- Training outcomes
- Technical assistance and mentoring
- The Discovery Process and placement outcomes
- Identified challenges and future directions

Findings

Training Outcomes

Person centered practices training.

As of March 2017, 39 Hired Hands (HH) employees with disabilities, 18 HH support team members, and 30 family members, friends, and related support staff completed training on creating a person-centered culture at MDI. The training was offered at MDI's Minneapolis location and again in Grand Rapids. Person-centered thinking (PCT), a philosophy behind service provision that supports positive control and self-direction, is foundational in guiding the customized employment (CE) process. Since CE was a relatively new concept to HH, job seekers, and families, it was critical to include all stakeholders in this training. Leadership shared how increasing awareness and implementation of PCT continues to bring value to their services overall, and not just in the realm of community employment. One employment services team member shared,

"PCT training helped me be better equipped each time I met with individuals I worked with. I am hoping that moving forward, PCT will be the accepted standard versus a new approach."

Customized employment training.

Customized employment training is a real world application of person centered practices in employment services. MDI staff and administration (n=9) completed three full-day trainings on CE and innovative placement strategies. The in-person training, as well as additional online instruction and technical assistance, were well received by MDI staff and administration. Over 75% of employment services team members reported that they felt encouraged by the training and felt it was relevant to their work. They also shared that the training was well aligned with the direction MDI was moving in terms of helping

individuals with disabilities who want to find meaningful and integrated work in their communities. The final CE training survey indicated that 75% of team members felt that they were prepared to apply their learning to their work.

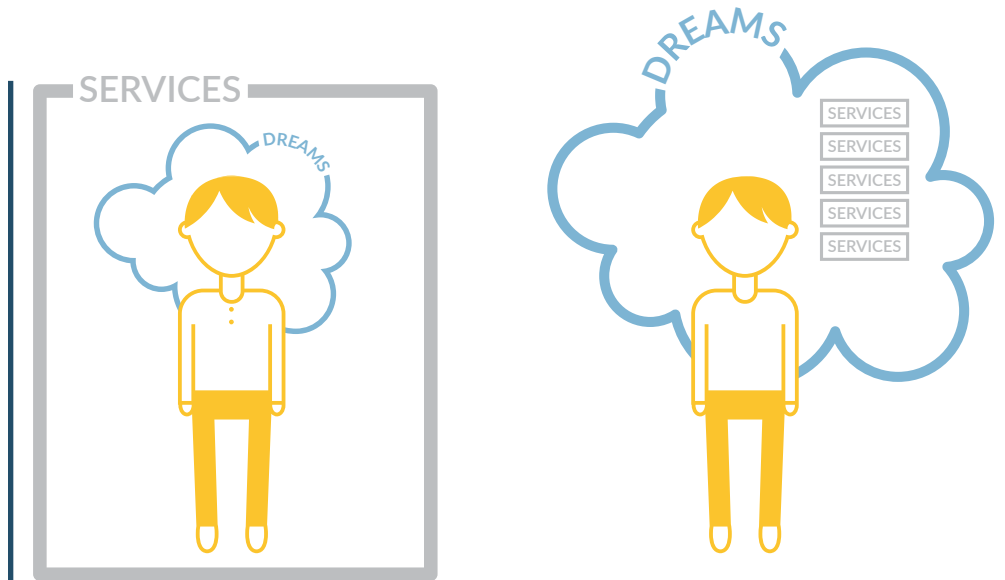
Comments from team members were promising, "I liked the discussion about 'dream jobs' and think that could lead to great discussions with our employees with disabilities." Others said they appreciated learning how to ask more questions to dig deeper into why someone shares they want or would like a specific job; how to better communicate with employers about jobs; and different ways to develop an "elevator speech" used in talking with potential employers about hiring people with disabilities.

Several service team members reported they felt the tools offered would be very helpful and gave

them new ways of approaching employers in an effective way in order to support both the job seeker and the business as a whole. One team member shared, "The visual resume is a great tool that has a valuable application for many job seekers." Other tools participants felt would be useful were one-page profiles, the Discovery Process in general, and informational interviews. The post-project survey also highlighted the importance of success stories, as many staff shared that the "real-life" experiences that ICI staff shared were especially useful.

College of Employment Services (CES) courses. Access to online training served as an additional mechanism to provide information on CIE to the employment services team. Seven employment services team members completed the online curriculum instruction from Direct Course: College of Employment Supports (CES). CES offers courses built around a nationally recognized set of competencies from the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE). MDI leadership shared that concepts of the online instruction were applicable to their work at MDI, making it valuable for all team members on an ongoing basis. On the post project survey, several staff shared they found the online training modules useful in better understanding CE and person-centered approaches.

Additional findings. Feeling comfortable and well-equipped to speak with families and support teams was a critical competency for all MDI employment services team



Nick has been a Hired Hands employee for over 10 years. In the spring of 2018 some of his friends were finding jobs in the community, and Nick became interested in finding another job in addition to working at MDI Hired Hands. Nick has a fascination with workplaces, careers that people have and name badges. When a local company, Northwoods Candy, approached the president of the Chamber of Commerce to hire a person with a disability, he thought of MDI. Nick was the first person asked if he was interested. He and other job seekers performed short paid work trials to see if it was a good fit for both Northwoods Candy and the potential employee. After six job trials, Nick was clearly the right person for the job. He is meticulous when packaging candy and loves having new coworkers! Nick was officially hired by Northwoods Candy in June of 2018. Throughout the months Nick has learned tasks such as wrapping, weighing, and labeling of the various candy. Nick looks forward to going to his job every week, and he now has his own name tag to wear when he is at the candy store.

members. Team members (n=9) were asked how they felt about talking with families and/or support teams regarding competitive, integrated employment. Initially 15% of team members were not comfortable doing so, 69% were somewhat comfortable, and 15% felt confident speaking to the point. At the close of the project all participants were comfortable with discussing CE with families and their support teams. Additionally, 33% reported being somewhat comfortable, and 67%

now felt confident when sharing information about CE with family members and support teams. One team member reported, "Every training opportunity and TA session added to my level of confidence in talking with families and support teams. I am much more comfortable and excited about my work as a placements specialist as a result." Team members also reported learning to be more patient and respectful of the time it sometimes takes for families to adjust to viewing

Establishing a shared power dynamic between the job seeker, the employment specialist, and the employer is foundational for success with a competitive and integrated employment model.

their child's abilities from a strength-based perspective, rather than that of the previous deficit model. Team members acknowledged the importance of families finding a comfort level with new concepts like "dignity of risk," and "presumed competence," both of which are related to the development of increased expectations.

Establishing a shared power dynamic among the job seeker, the placement specialist, and the employer is foundational for success with a competitive and integrated employment model. On the introductory survey, when asked how prepared staff (n=9) felt about talking to employers about a specific job seeker or about hiring people with disabilities, 39% did not feel comfortable, 46% felt somewhat comfortable, and no staff felt confident. Post-survey data indicated that no staff felt uncomfortable after the training, 33% felt somewhat comfortable, and 67% now felt confident about speaking with employers about hiring a specific individual with disabilities. One new placement specialist shared, "Each time I speak with a community employer, I feel more prepared to speak about hiring people with disabilities. Having a great understanding of our caseload and their [job seeker] abilities and interests found through Discovery helps me speak

confidently about the services one of our job seekers could offer a business owner. "

Initially, when staff (n=9) were asked how prepared they felt to talk with job seekers about competitive, integrated employment, 77% initially reported they may be comfortable. Post-survey data demonstrated this dropped to 33% and those reporting that it was likely increased to 66%.

The majority of employment services team members (i.e. staff) mentioned a positive impact of discussing job seekers' dreams, rather than focusing solely on available services. One staff shared, "On a personal note, generating genuine excitement and hope in job seekers was definitely one of the most rewarding experiences for me." This is promising for MDI's future and the job seekers they serve.

Technical Assistance and Mentoring

Staff from ICI provided technical assistance and mentoring to members of MDI's placement team. Leadership shared that

all employment services team members benefited from the expertise of the technical assistance, especially after the completion of formal training (e.g. person centered practices, customized employment) as they were implementing new practices and processes. Staff shared that the technical assistance provided valuable problem-solving methods and general support. One shared, "Every training opportunity and TA session added to my level of confidence. I am much more comfortable and excited by my work as a placement specialist as a result." Other staff felt that having technical assistance helped them build confidence in working toward competitive, integrated employment. They shared that the ICI team was a great resource because they could share real experience and help the team talk through misadventures and challenges as they arose.

Both leadership and staff recognized the Discovery Process as a valuable tool for discovering an individual's interests and skills. One team member shared, "Time spent observing individuals in different settings during Discovery proved to be valuable in looking at Hired Hands employees with a new set of lenses."

Leadership shared that the mentoring provided by ICI staff was also critical in supporting employment services team

"Time spent observing individuals in different settings during Discovery proved to be valuable in looking at Hired Hands employees with a new set of lenses."

members in approaching their work in a person-centered manner, as well as supporting employment specialists in determining which job seekers would benefit from this process and how this process would be completed on an individual basis. One staff said, "The technical assistance provided different approaches to use with different job seekers, with the strongest message centered around meeting job seekers where they are, and helping them get excited about realistic competitive, integrated employment in the community."

Leadership also shared that "Challenges will always occur for placement specialists, such as a family member that is opposed to the concept of community employment, a business creating barriers for possible employment, or the employee with a disability changing their mind." Having mentoring and technical assistance available provided an additional resource and support for placement specialists. Leadership shared that employment services team members' confidence and level of comfort increased as an outcome of ICI staff mentoring, "I anticipate that they will continue to hone their ability to speak to

Chase has unique skills and significant challenges which make finding employment a daunting task. A MDI placement specialist spent months working with Chase to learn about his skills, preferences, and needs. In the summer of 2018, Chase's placement team found a paid work trial at a local berry patch, North Country Development. Chase tried pulling weeds from the rows of berries, but was unable to bend to the ground for long periods of time. Chase's placement specialist worked with North Country Development to find a different task better suited to his abilities. With coaching and support, Chase was able to successfully pick weeds out of the pots set up on the work table, clearing the weeds, and setting them back in a neat row. Chase worked twice a week for the entire summer and early fall until the season ended. Chase is now looking for a year-round job where he can apply his skills and experience from the berry patch.

employers, specifically with more challenging conversations."

The Discovery Process and Placement

Discovery. The Discovery process is an alternative to traditional standardized assessments and train and place approaches. It's a person centered approach that involves getting to know a person before developing an employment plan. With formal training completed, placement specialists (n=3) queried all Hired Hand employees (n=58) and identified 31 who expressed an initial interest in working in a community job. The other 27 were content with their work at MDI's HH.

Twelve HH employees agreed to participate in Discovery. To better support these individuals, employment services team members attended 20 community events for networking purposes and completed informational meetings with employers (n=73). In addition, 12 businesses agreed to provide paid work trials in addition to learning more about CE.

Job placement. MDI employment services team members were able to place and support five job seekers in finding competitive, integrated employment in community businesses during this project. These job seekers reported many positive outcomes. One job seeker, when asked what they liked about their job, reported, "Everything!" Others shared that they enjoy learning, the uniform, food discounts, and simply getting paid. Another job seeker shared that everyone works together as a big team and reported feeling proud when friends and family visited. All of the job seekers reported feeling that additional coaching support should continue, both on the job and with arranging and navigating transportation.

"The technical assistance provided different approaches to use with different job seekers, with the strongest message centered around meeting job seekers where they are, and helping them get excited about realistic competitive, integrated employment in the community."

Identified Challenges

Workforce Challenges

A stable workforce was identified as a critical need to ensure employment programs can meet the needs of job seekers with disabilities. Leadership and placement specialists identified staffing as the greatest challenge to MDI in achieving their project goals. High turnover, staff having different levels of experience in the field, and not having all placement specialists on board as the project launched, were cited as the most significant challenges facing MDI in facilitating competitive, integrated employment with job seekers.

Employer Perceptions

Employers and other community members may hold preconceived stereotypes about people with disabilities. Evaluation data collected on the training and technical assistance provided by ICI revealed an impact on staff's perception of community-based employment for people with disabilities and illuminated some of the challenges associated with this shift in thinking. Pre-project survey data (n=9) demonstrated that employment services team members started the process with positive and hopeful perspectives, but the following shifts did occur as they worked through the process over the life of the project.

When first asked how likely it is that people with disabilities, even those with significant disabilities, will be employed in the community, MDI employment services team members and leadership identified that chance as maybe or likely

at 100%. On the post project survey, only 77% felt this was likely. Staff's firsthand experience with HH employees may have been a contributor to this shift in opinion. Leadership acknowledged that some job seekers have been at HH for many years, and have well-established histories and limitations, making it difficult for some team members to presume competence, and try new things.

with disabilities, risk of a lawsuit or a formal discrimination complaint, and concerns that workers with disabilities might not be able to perform the job duties in an increasingly demanding workplace (Kaye et al., 2011). However, on the post-project survey, staff still had an upbeat attitude. "I get really excited when we see people who I never thought could work in the community get jobs." Another

"I am excited to see if it helps more people with disabilities find significant employment and overcome some of these barriers."

When first asked how likely it was that community employers are willing to hire and/or create new positions for employees with disabilities, 85% of staff (n=9) felt this may be possible. Post project surveys revealed 44% of team members answered maybe, with 44% answered unlikely. The changes in perceptions are likely a reflection of staff's experiences navigating job development and placement in local businesses in a community context that has not always viewed or seen people with disabilities in competitive, integrated employment. Hiring practices under ADA have pushed forward a movement to employ adults with disabilities, but the reality is this movement is slow moving due to a number of lingering factors. These include a lack an awareness of how to deal with and accommodate workers

shared, "I am excited to see if it helps more people with disabilities find significant employment and overcome some of these barriers."

New Directions

Change can be hard. Placement specialists at MDI shared that many Hired Hands employees with disabilities do not want to leave their current jobs. One team member shared, "There is little to no motivation for people to leave where they are now...It's critically important for them to get out in the community and see what opportunities may be available to them." Many individuals with disabilities have not been exposed to or offered other employment, and choosing something new or unknown is often met with resistance. Other team members shared that HH employees and many of their families appreciate

“I am excited about the possibility to change attitudes about people with disabilities working in their communities.”

the pay and benefits that are offered through MDI. It was also noted that HH provides a valuable social outlet for the employees. Many simply do not want to leave their friends to work in the community. These findings affirm that HH is viewed as an important and influential opportunity for workers with disabilities, however, continually offering new experiences and opportunities, and checking in with individuals supported is critical.

The perceptions around implementation also resulted in unforeseen change. Pre-project surveys indicated that 77% of team members felt community employers would be willing to implement employer-based job support strategies for individual employees with disabilities. Post-survey data indicated that only 44% felt they would do so. These shifts likely demonstrate a reality check experienced by professionals when they more closely invest in a shift that involves personal, organizational, and systems change at its most basic levels. As many participants pointed out, the traditional foundation for employment when working with individuals with disabilities is focused on their disability, not their strengths, and further limited by stigma and lack of opportunity. Even the smallest increments of progress should be celebrated. Additionally, they shared that rural communities struggle with a lack of

diverse employers, transportation challenges, and a lack of privacy. Barriers of high unemployment rates, community members' perceptions and fear about working with people living with disabilities, and breaking through self-imposed barriers in employers' minds contributed to the work being challenging.

These findings reveal the need for further discussion, yet should not prevent exploring, trying, and implementing innovative employment practices. Building up the toolbox of resources, knowledge and tools can result in increased enthusiasm and lasting impact one job seeker at a time. Simply stated one staff stated, “I feel like the training and technical assistance that were provided has given MDI a progressive edge as an organization and a strong voice in meeting the requirements of WIOA and Minnesota’s Olmstead Plan.” Even as challenges and barriers to competitive, integrated employment have become more clear as a result of this project, organizations like MDI are still charged with, and dedicated to increasing the employment of people with disabilities.

When asked to identify the most difficult challenges, placement specialists (n=3), stated that not everything went smoothly, but they recognized this was true when new approaches are tested. Specific examples included that it was often

difficult trying to customize a job placement within a corporate job classification system that requires both “front of the house” and “back of the house” responsibilities. They commented that small employers tended to prefer creative week-by-week scheduling versus a set schedule, making it difficult for individuals with disabilities who count on a structured and predictable environment to ward off anxiety. Other concerns were more environmental. Examples include, a challenging orientation process due to the out-of-town location, lack of handicapped accessibility related to transportation, building access, and bathroom facilities at the meeting location. When asked how they could mitigate challenges, placement specialists shared they would be more assertive early on regarding the needs of the job seeker, and plan to address issues that were a challenge for the job seeker at prior jobs. Working with the employer to put parameters and milestones around the job trial process are also important so there is a more efficient and defined path to success in place.

Job seekers were also asked about their challenges when working in the community. Concerns included the fear of making mistakes when on the job, or job coaching fading too soon if things were going well. The greatest challenges reported by job seekers were inconsistent bus transportation, and the lack of support in making transportation arrangements. Transportation access is a significant barrier to employment throughout Minnesota, but even more barriers can exist in rural areas.

What's Next for MDI?

When Employment services team members were asked what they were excited about post-project they replied: "Assisting people with finding employment that meets their needs and wishes for employment."

Hope is alive and well at MDI. The post-project survey indicated that 75% of staff (n=9) felt they were prepared to apply customized employment approaches in their work. Staff reported that Discovery profiles, paid job trials, and leveraging an individual's family and larger networks held the greatest promise and should be pursued. In addition, 75% of placement specialists (n=3) felt that after an individual was in a community job, follow-up and follow-along checks were the most important support, with job coaching and training a close second. MDI Leadership reported being pleased with progress. They shared that this project created awareness and a place to begin, but felt that MDI needs to continue to work to elevate the level of confidence of the employment services team in being able to speak to the opportunities that employment in the community provides to both job seekers and employers. One team member shared, "Every opportunity builds my confidence." Another shared, "Many more meaningful opportunities to have these conversations need to happen."

As an affirmative social enterprise, MDI is dedicated to providing opportunity, choice, and customized employment options. They are well-positioned for the future to support individuals in competitive, integrated

employment. MDI is committed to supporting individuals in Minneapolis, Grand Rapids, Cohasset, Deer River, and beyond with new opportunities to pursue competitive, integrated employment and active members of their community. Leadership, as well as the Employment Services team members, strive to be an employment entity in Northern Minnesota that is both creative and inclusive in connecting job seekers with disabilities to employers who

are looking for great employees. Leadership at MDI recognizes that shifting the culture of an organization to improve services for people with disabilities is not easy work. One team member wrapped up the project eloquently, "We need to let go of the past way of doing things and recognizing this change is here to stay." People with disabilities, including those with significant disabilities, can work in the community with the right supports.

"We need to let go of the past way of doing things and recognizing this change is here to stay."

Post Placement Survey Data:

- 75% (n=64) of employers contacted and engaged had not worked with MDI HH prior to this project. (25% had)
- The majority of (50%) of initial contacts were walk ins. 25% were referrals from the Chamber of Commerce passed down through MDI's CEO. 25% came about through a request for an informational interview
- 75% (n=5) of placements took 3-6 months to accomplish. 25% were placed within 1 month from first meeting to hire date.
- There was noticeable diversity in how much time placement specialists (n=3) spent on the customized employment process when working with MDI job seekers. 66.7% reported spending between 16-20 hours per week on CE, with 33.3% spending 6-10 hours.
- Through this process, MDI placement specialist (n=3) provided a number of supports for the job seekers. The greatest need reported was follow-along checks at 75%. Job coaching and on the job training both came in at 50%, with 25% of their effort reported as being used for recognition of employees' accomplishments and eagerness to learn and grow in their jobs.

References

Kaye, H. S., Jans, L. H., & Jones, E. C. (2011). Why don't employers hire and retain workers with disabilities? *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 21(4), 526-36.

Resource Guide

Direct Course: College of Employment Supports

<http://directcourseonline.com/employment-services/>

Disability Hub

<https://disabilityhubmn.org/work/>

How to develop a visual resume from Marc Gold and Associates

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgRv4bSdLdU> <https://carbonmade.com> &

<https://Figdi.com>

Informed-Choice Toolkit

<https://mn.db101.org/documents/Informed%20choice%20toolkit%20v3.pdf>

Importance of the Environment

<http://www.learningcommunity.us/pcthinking.htm>

It's more than just a job: Person centered planning in employment

<http://www.communityinclusion.org/pdf/ib16.pdf>

The Learning Community for Person Centered Practices

<http://www.learningcommunity.us/>

LifeCourse One-page profile template

<http://www.lifecoursetools.com/lifecourse-portfolios/> &

<http://www.lifecoursetools.com/lifecourse-employment-video-series/>

Marc Gold associates visual resume planning template

http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition/form_portplan.asp

Minnesota Diversified Industries

www.MDI.org

Minnesota Person Centered Change Projects:

<https://mpccp.umn.edu/>

Minnesota Positive Support Practices

www.mnpsp.org

One Page Profiles Descriptions - Examples and discussion

<http://www.learningcommunity.us/onepageprofiles.htm>

People first Handout

https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter_photos.pdf

SABE: The truth comes from us

http://www.thinkwork.org/sites/thinkwork.org/files/files/ThinkWork_sabe_14_F.pdf

Why PCP Matters, Self-advocates perspective

<https://www.youtube.com>

[watch?v=NLPVxO13KeU&list=PLbrrhT8nj86zLjsXFozOtkkio43Qxiqf&index=19](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLPVxO13KeU&list=PLbrrhT8nj86zLjsXFozOtkkio43Qxiqf&index=19)