

THE WORK SCIENCE CENTER



The Work Science Center Podcast

Episode 5

Employing People with Disabilities in the Modern Workforce

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Keaton Fletcher: Welcome to the Work Science Center Podcast, brought to you by the Work Science Center of the Georgia Institute of Technology. I am your host, Keaton Fletcher. You can find more about the Work Science Center at our website www.WorkScienceCenter.GATech.edu. In today's podcast I speak with Devin O'Connor, founder of The Grow Group, a non-profit organization located in Tampa, Florida, that provides training and facilitates meaningful employment for individuals with disabilities. Devin and I discuss ways to better incorporate individuals with disabilities in the modern workforce and how the science and practice of management can better include this underrepresented population.

Alright thanks, Devin, for joining me today. Just to start off with, could you tell me a bit about your background and The Grow Group?

Devin O'Connor: Yeah, absolutely. And, I appreciate you having me today, Keaton. So, basically, throughout my life, I have always worked or volunteered with individuals with cognitive and developmental disabilities or limitations. When I was younger, my grandma started an organization called the GroGroup, G-R-O Group, in Tarpon Springs, which is Pinellas County, Florida. And, basically the intention of this nonprofit was to assist these adults with developmental disabilities in learning how to grow their own produce, and basically, in her words, have some pocket change. So, when I was working with them a lot of times what we would do, in addition to crafts and puzzles, and things to keep them entertained and engaged, is go out into the garden and teach them how to grow. So, fast forward, I don't know, maybe twenty years, when I was kind of doing some soul searching and trying to figure out how to incorporate my background and degree in business, and then just my internal desire to assist and help and do good in the world, I created The Grow Group, which is G-R-O-W Group, and we are a non-profit organization and a social enterprise that works with any individual with any disability in providing them workforce development and training and then also direct job placement.

KF: So, roughly how many people have you served, are you serving? How many people work for you?

DO: OK, so we have experienced kind of exponential growth over the last year or two, but right now, I think the last count was 23 people working with us. I think over the last eight-and-a-half years, we have probably placed between 1,000 and 1,500 people in employment and then I guess we have trained at least four to five thousand people. At any given time now we are currently working with somewhere between 150 and 250 people. So, our case load, we've got, usually we try to have about 20 clients per job coach, or employment specialist, as their main caseload, and then auxiliary services, obviously they can add some additional clients and services on too.

KF: OK, walk me through what it would look like from a client's perspective from start to finish.

DO: OK. A client is, by the time we receive them, they have put in an application with the Department of Education. In our state, Florida, and also Georgia, it is through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. So, once they have an application they are assigned a VR counselor, they have to prove some sort of disability in order to qualify, and then they begin building their



case. A case can be anything from helping support them in schooling or training, sometimes even a bachelor's depending on if they have the aptitude and interests and grades and dedication, or history of dedication. It could be receiving mental health counselling and rehabilitation. It could be just modifying a vehicle if somebody has a spinal cord injury, and they just need transportation, they already have a job. So vocational rehabilitation is responsible for removing any initial barriers to an individual's potential to become employed. And then that is where we would come in. We then receive the referral. In Florida it's through REBA which is an electronic system where we get the referral and any supporting documents about the individual. Then we schedule an in-take to meet with them and collect additional information that we feel like is important for us to do the best job that we possibly can in finding them a position that they are interested in.

And then from a day-to-day basis, it is ultimately our clients' responsibility to obtain employment. So, we let them know from the beginning that we are not here to basically find them a job and wish them luck. We are here to give them the skills and the toolset they need in order to do this for the rest of their lives. So, we spend a lot of time up front on a daily basis, or meeting with them on a weekly basis for a couple of hours a week, and from the beginning it's the intake, usually our second meeting is cover letter and résumé writing, our third meeting will be interview preparation, and usually by our fourth meeting we are starting to put a plan together, an individualized career plan, where we can then go out and start to communicate with employers about the individual's interests. And also communicate with the individual about the best way for them to go out and communicate on their own, or we will take them and job develop with them on their behalf so they can see what that looks like. So, after the fourth meeting it really just depends on the person, their interests, their job goal or industry they are interested in, and then any limitations they might have. A huge barrier for us, kind of across the board, or I would say two barriers: the first is confidence. So, just knowing that we believe in them and we feel like they are at a point in their life where they are able to do this, they are able to find employment. And then, the other common thread is usually transportation. There is always some sort of lack of transportation, either in an urban or suburban area, or in a rural area where either the bus doesn't take them where they need to go and they live outside of the bus lines, or they have a family member that they are relying on to use the car, or they don't have the funds to pay for insurance or a driver's license, so transportation is usually a challenge as well. But, in general, every person's process looks a little different. We are meeting with them on a weekly basis to provide as much support as possible, and then it just kind of goes from there based on their individual needs.

KF: So you are providing training and skill development on the getting the job part, do you have any role in the skills they need once they are on the job?

DO: Yeah, we do. So it is our responsibility to not only understand the position they are hired for and oftentimes help them get that position, but then once they are hired, depending on the type of referral, so in Florida and throughout really the country, there are two different types of referrals. One would be more of an employment service referral where the individual just needs that up-front support and assistance and then once they get the job, there is some sort of understanding



that most likely they are not going to require a lot of help keeping the job, it is just removing those initial barriers. And then there is also a supported employment referral, in which the individual has more significant limitations or maybe they have a dual diagnosis with more than one limitation or disability and so the expectation there is that once we place them in the job goal that they are interested in, that we are going to continue to support them, help them understand what the employers expectations are and how we can assist them and support them with producing and making sure that they clearly understand how to do the job, and usually that is longer term support. When we stabilize a person, we have some sort of indicator that they have been successful in the position and are capable of performing every function of the job. And so, at that point we stabilize them and then we follow them for the next six months to ensure that they are truly successful while we start to phase out and create a plan where we can start to build natural supports on their job like family members or coworkers or a supervisor, who if there is an issue, instead of relying on us, they can then, in a more natural setting go to that coworker, or that family member or whoever else would be in their lives to support them from that point moving forward.

KF: You have to wear so many different hats and I imagine every job you place people into they face different challenges, and probably each client based on their different disabilities also faces different challenges. How do you go about matching people to jobs?

DO: That is part of the process with vocational rehabilitation where they will do a vocational assessment and a psychological evaluation or assessment and start to identify some transferrable skills or an industry that the person has been successful in in the past, or if they have an aptitude maybe we will do a career scope assessment to gain a better understanding of some of the other industries that they could transfer those some of those skills to if they are not able to return back to work or the position they were previously in. And we do that part too, to be honest, we actually do administer vocational evaluations and assessments. We do all of those services as well, but if we didn't, then we will receive that report and will have clearly identified at least one job goal based on that person's interests, abilities, education, experience, etcetera, and then we will, from that point moving forward, start to pursue it using that as our plan. Then we will start to go out and start to job develop, create relationships or reach back out to existing relationships within that industry where they typically hire that specific job goal. And then we will try to bridge that gap in the system with finding employment through those pipelines.

KF: You are still working with them for the following six months to make sure your clients are successful while they are on the job? How do you do that?

DO: A couple of things I have noticed that as an individual—we call them employment specialists, other people might call them job coaches, there are a lot of different terms for the positions we have—as you gain tenure in this role, you start to learn different industries as you go. One thing we look for from our hiring practice is someone who has worked in a few industries and has an understanding of multiple industries rather than just one focus, and I think that helps from an adaptability perspective for the job coach or employment specialist to adapt to some of the industries that they have experience in so they can then coach their clients within those industries while they start to learn and tack on new industries.



So with each new person we are placing, literally my day can consist of working with someone who is a bagger at a grocery store, all the way up to a nurse practitioner or a person with three Ph.D.s who is attempting to get a job at the FDA as an engineer. So, not only is every client completely different, and the level of support completely different, but the scope varies greatly. And there are organizations that focus specifically on individuals within a specific disability, like that population. But as an organization, we feel it is important to represent anyone with a disability, because they are so different even within those specific populations that to classify or categorize we are doing that person an injustice by not really getting to know them and placing the disability before the person. So that was a really round-about way of saying we meet with the individual, we provide the service based on the individual, and then we will go in and if you don't already know the industry or the job, we will go in and learn it with them so that we can support them on the job.

KF: Are some companies more or less willing to work with you and to work with your clients? And have you noticed there are certain attitudes?

DO: There are definitely organizations and industries that are not as open. I think a challenge for us is raising more awareness about what disability looks like or doesn't look like, and educating and informing employers about any preconceived notions that they might have. We usually like to crush those or destroy that idea of what disability means. And so, if an employer has either had a bad experience working or hiring a person with a disability, or maybe they know someone who has a disability, automatically when they hear the word disability they are moving that person where they had a bad experience into this potential applicant's place. And so, we often have to demystify or dispel that first, create a relationship based around either the person's capabilities and experience or the employer's needs and then bridge that.

Some of the industries that we work with more often than not are in an office setting, medical setting, hospitality, like hotel and restaurant. We do a lot of maintenance. We do a lot of customer service, education, people who are interested in working with kids or adults. Virtually any industry that a person can work in, we are working with a client but there are some common threads. We do some jobs being identified as a job goal more frequently than others. So, those are the easier cases for us to work with because we already paved the way and created those relationships. The challenge for us is when we get someone who is interested in graphic design and we haven't worked with a company in a while in graphic design, or drafting, or that person with three PhDs who wants to work at the FDA and we have never worked with the FDA before. So, that kind of forces us to step outside our normal role, and really learn about the industry and position so that we can overcome any barriers the employer might put in the way.

KF: Have you noticed cultures with coworkers or customers clients would be working with that are either helpful where people are going to be more likely to succeed in the organization, or not helpful, make it really difficult to keep people in organizations successful?

DO: Yes we do, both. We noticed that if a company is newer, if it is a smaller mom and pop company, or it is a relatively new kind of fledgling company, there is much less bureaucratic red tape, and much more openness to the unknown, because I think as an organization they are



experiencing unknown on a day-to-day basis, so throwing in the idea of hiring and individual with a disability, they see as a potential opportunity. Some of the older organizations, from the perspective of if they have been around a long time, if they have really formalized their process, if they have created a lot of layers within human resources, or within their hiring practice, those are the biggest challenges because even if you identify a person who is open to hiring an individual with a disability, you are still going to run into barriers along the way as it moves up the hiring rank. And so, from an organizational culture perspective, we are finding that, and I know that this is not politically correct, that younger organizations are more open-minded and more open to hiring individuals with disabilities, because there is not 20-30 years of this preconceived notion of an individual with a disability their only chance of working is working in adult day center doing piecework, which was the norm 30 years ago. Disability is relatively a new thing in the workforce, so a lot of people are coming with preconceived notions if they have been in the workforce for a long time, but if they haven't we're seeing that they are a lot more open to hiring these individuals and working with us.

KF: So have you seen that shift over just your time with the Grow Group that it has been easier, for lack of a better term, to place people?

DO: Yeah, I have. I kind of reached out in anticipating this interview with you to see if that was the experience for some of our other job coaches, and even ones who have been around for only a couple of years have said they feel like we're progressively moving in a really positive and productive direction. People are more open. Organizations are more open, and small mom and pop places are more open to hiring individuals with disabilities. But not only just hiring them but also really giving them an honest attempt to ensure their success. So, hiring them is one thing because there is tax incentives and there is that overall feeling that you are doing someone a favor, which we see sometimes. But, to actually truly have a place for them within your company and to train them, and to meet them where they are at, and to have an understanding of what their limitations are but really honor their strengths and all of their abilities is definitely something that all of our job coaches are experiencing more and more over the last couple of years, as compared to when I first started it only eight years ago, I think there was a lot of barriers that employers were putting in the way that were making it more challenging.

KF: So what would you say, now are the biggest challenges you face moving forward?

DO: I think one of largest ones right now, there is a couple, but one is inter-agency or inter-organization collaboration. So, right now we are a non-profit or a social enterprise, and we go out and we are representing the client, and the client is working with Vocational Rehabilitation, which is part of the Department of Education, and then overarching that is WIOA (the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act) which is requiring that federal agencies like the Department of Labor, and the Department of Education, and the Department of Justice work together. So we are seeing this challenge where there are a lot of cooks in the kitchen and when we are working with government agencies, things tend to take a little longer. And so, as a smaller, more agile, non-profit, we are able to move very quickly and so we are seeing a challenge in how are we supposed to interpret our contracts and our relationships with these government agencies and translate those into real-time agile and adaptable services so we are



able to serve as many people, as quickly as possible, but to provide a high-quality service. So that is one.

Another challenge that we are seeing now is the use of online applications and assessments. And the reason that that is a challenge for the application process is if a person is not computer literate or savvy, or just not familiar with utilizing a computer for work, they might not be able to fill out an application online, which is automatically a barrier for them for that position no matter how qualified they are. And, the other thing is the assessment process. So, if an individual has any type of limitation, let's say they are on the autism spectrum and they have a hard time understanding or interpreting a hypothetical scenario, if they have never had to do that before, how are they going to explain how they would handle that situation. But we know after working with them that they would be incredible in customer service, or incredible in this specific position, and in this specific scenario. I feel like the assessments are weeding individuals out that are otherwise completely capable of performing not only the essential functions of the job, but being one of the best hires the organization made. So those are two.

KF: Yeah, two pretty big ones. That last one is, I feel like, especially where your field and my field tend to overlap a lot. Because, we spend a lot of time making those assessments and testing to see if they are causing adverse impact, making it more challenging for one group than another to get the jobs, but I feel like most of the time that research is focusing on men versus women, or differences in race, or differences in age, but very few if many people are talking about people with disabilities. And like you pointed out people with autism thinking about hypothetical questions; and in our field, we think there is a situational judgment test, that hypothetical, you are in the situation, how do you handle it? We lean into those. We find them pretty effective at hiring people and from your perspective there are whole groups of people that could be cutting out who are still qualified for the job. And there is, at least from my perspective, sort of a disconnect there.

DO: I completely agree. I don't know what it is called, but is it called validating when you are taking a group of individuals to verify that an assessment truly works that it is evidence-based?

KF: Yeah.

DO: So that is something I have been thinking about a lot. It is just why aren't, especially, we are talking towards the end of 2018. We are talking about working with and hiring individuals with disabilities, especially with the unemployment rate at what it is at. I think it is 3.9%. So this is a group of individuals who are qualified and capable. I just looked earlier today, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 18.7% of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 65.7% of people without disabilities, who are employed. And that, I don't know how accurate that is; I am assuming it is pretty accurate if it is published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics online. But my question is, if we are scrounging to find capable individuals for some of these positions, why wouldn't we start validating some of these assessments and include individuals with disabilities to gain a better understanding of who we are filtering in and who we are filtering out? So if they have a job coach, and that job coach, as part of the reasonable accommodation can explain the questions on an assessment in a way that make sense to the individual then maybe they will get



hired. But really, what is the purpose of the assessment? We are kind of going against the intention of the assessment. So, from your perspective, and maybe this is for a later time, how could we start to raise awareness about including this population so that it truly represents the workforce that is available, so we can start filtering in these individuals instead of filtering them out

KF: Well, I think we are taking our first steps right now. But, I think just raising awareness in the I-O community, with like that statistic from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that is mind-blowing. That is a radical distance. And as you said, I think, often the science follows, or at least that is hopefully the way that it works. And now that the economy is in such a way that we are scrounging for people for jobs, we need qualified, capable candidates that maybe we have not thought of before. That need will hopefully push the science to explore how to do that. Because, we have not had to. It is very easy for us to give computerized tests or assessments, and validate those with thousands of people, and it is much harder to try to do that with this smaller population, a much smaller population, that we have not had to take into consideration before, but certainly it is worth-while.

DO: Keaton, if you could get on that, that would be awesome.

KF: Yeah, I'll do that right now. The other part of this is that there should be this cross-talk between the academics, the research, and practice. So, from your perspective, because I think there is a lot of overlap between I-O psychology and your organizational mission, where do you go for resources when you are working with a client who wants to explore a new job market, things along those lines? Kind of like where do you search? Where do you find your resources?

DO: Some of the resources that we get from a training perspective when we are training personnel for our organization, are Virginia Commonwealth University, George Washington University, some of the larger universities that specifically focus on people with disabilities and employment. And then, we use AskJAN.org for an understanding any accommodations any individual might need in order to be successful based on their disability. We use O*NET to identify employment goals and to also have a better understanding of any projections for that employment goal. So if they are increasing year over year, and it's looking more and more likely that it is promising for future positions, we might suggest those job goals as opposed to one that is slowly starting to diminish. We also use RehabWorks.Org in Florida which is put out by the Department of Education and Vocational Rehabilitation but each state has their own VR, vocational rehabilitation, and each state's website has really a plethora of resources both for our clients but also for organizations like ours or providers. Indeed.com is an incredible tool for us. We have a lot of success on that website as far as being able to create a filter based on the individual's personal job search, what they need, and that criteria. And then to go out and pull from different websites across the country, Indeed does a really good job of streamlining those for us so that we are able to save time and not have to go to each individual website. And then I think, just plugging in locally from more of a social perspective to some advocacy groups or to different organizations that might not have an employment focus, but that are either focused on employment, or focused on individuals with disabilities, and then helping them connect.



Because, a lot of times they are all looking for the same thing, but there is this glass wall where they might not communicate, but they could really help each other out.

KF: That is an awesome list of resources, and I am really proud that O*NET is on it, because, boom, I-O Psychology: we are doing useful things.

DO: Oh cool!

KF: Yeah, that was us! We did that!

DO: Well perfect, I appreciate that then.

KF: As we wrap things up, are there any questions that you think it would be great for us as I-O Psychologists to look at to help you out? Answers to problems that you might have that do not exist now? How can we help you better do your job?

DO: One thing would be, and you and I have talked about this before, but just, is it possible to create an assessment or tool to scan a company's culture? And, if so, to specifically scan it and provide enough information for an individual, it could be anyone really, just universal design, where we are able to not only get an understanding of the position and also go in and actually see either the brick-and-mortar location or the website or whatever it is, but also to have a really thorough understanding of the organization's culture, and use that as a triad to understand would this person that we are working with be a good fit? So that we are not setting them up for failure. And, so that they are thoroughly informed about many aspects or layers of the organization prior to both applying but also to beginning employment.

KF: I will also get on that tomorrow.

DO: OK, yeah, please work on that. I am writing a list too. I appreciate the O*NET, so that's definitely helpful. My other question is, is it possible from I-O psychology's perspective, to start demystifying the idea around hiring and retaining individuals with disabilities? So, we talked about how you guys might not even be considering that population when you are creating pre-employment assessments. And so, how, aside from this podcast, how do we start to raise more awareness on the front end of hiring to really create a space for individuals with disabilities because right now there is not a lot of training, and we are really relying on small organizations like ours to go out and to talk about disability and what it means. And to talk about ADA. And to talk about how can you hire a person and provide a reasonable accommodation in a way that makes sense to the employer, and to their business model and also doesn't create any additional work on their end. Would it be possible for I-O psychology to help us with demystifying this idea of disability in the workforce?

KF: Solid question. I don't think I can do that for you, but I'm sure someone out there can.

DO: Fair.

KF: Anything else you want to say on the future of work, on the role of integrating workers with disabilities into the modern workforce? Things that we should know from you?



DO: Not really. I think we covered a lot. I just appreciate you taking the time and interest to pry into this a little bit, because it sounds like something that is not covered a whole lot.

KF: Thank you very much. This was definitely enlightening and I am sure that for other I-O psychologists, I think you just sparked a whole slew of research ideas. So, thank you so much, Devin. And as we sign off, where can people find you and the Grow Group if they want more information about what you guys do?

DO: TheGrowGroup.Org is probably the best way. I would say that has all of our information on it. And then reaching out to me personally. Anyone is always welcome if they have any questions or ideas.

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