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AUTHOR Wadsworth, John; Cocco, Karen  
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ABSTRACT

Lifelong career development activities may assist persons with more severe forms of mental retardation in achieving occupational tenure. Occupational tenure is important if individuals are to move away from a succession of entry-level employment. Adaptive career development strategies and techniques may prevent job dissatisfaction and poor performance. This paper reviews strategies to create career growth within existing supported educational and work settings. (GCP)

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by

John Wadsworth  
Karen Cocco

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# **Career Development and Adults with Moderate to Severe Mental Retardation**

**John Wadsworth**

**Karen Cocco**

*Rehabilitation Counselor Education*

*The University of Iowa*

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## **Introduction**

Lifelong career development activities may assist persons with more severe forms of mental retardation in achieving occupational tenure. Occupational tenure is important if individuals are to move away from a succession of entry-level employment. Adaptive career development strategies and techniques may prevent job dissatisfaction and poor performance. This paper reviews information regarding the importance of lifelong career development activities and strategies to create career growth within existing supported educational and work settings.

## **Career Development and Adults with Moderate to Severe Mental Retardation**

Career development is vital to a quality lifestyle for persons with more severe forms of mental retardation. However, the existing research on the vocational rehabilitation of persons with moderate to severe mental retardation focuses on occupational choice rather than career development (Rumrill & Roessler, 1999). Occupational choice reflects a person's vocational decision at any point in time, whereas career development reflects an ongoing, developmental process that incorporates and integrates personal and environmental information (Szymanski & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996). Career development is a dynamic process requiring individuals to engage in the ongoing assessment, analysis and synthesis of relevant information.

For adults functioning within the moderate or severe range of mental retardation ongoing career counseling is an essential addition to skill development activities to promote career development. However, the focus on job placement and tenure activities often precludes a thoughtful focus on career development. This paper provides the rationale for, and illustrates the importance of, the inclusion of career development counseling in facilitating increased job satisfaction and promoting sustained patterns of employment among persons with moderate to severe mental retardation.

## **The Need for Career Development**

The research on career development suggests that there has been a tremendous shift in traditional work and in supported employment settings for persons with more severe forms of mental retardation over the past several decades (Mank, Cioffi, & Yovanoff, 2000). Successful career paths often reflect a succession of employed positions at different settings

rather than a single, sustained placement. As a result, a successful career trajectory might include a succession of short-term employment situations that positively contributed to an employee's existing job skills and professional portfolio. Career development can be a strategic method to achieve uninterrupted vocational development through successive employment opportunities.

Among adults with mental retardation, employment and job tenure is low (Schafer, Banks & Kregel, 1991). The finding that individuals with disabilities change jobs over time is a natural outcome of employment and is supported by employment statistics (Pumpian, Fisher, Certo, & Smalley, 1997). The cyclical nature of the labor market experience of most persons with more severe forms of mental retardation illustrates the need to maintain and enhance a positive outlook toward employment through long-term career goals that compliment short-term employment activities.

While, intelligence is associated with career maturity and decision-making skills, factors other than skills, abilities, and personality play a major role in career development and satisfaction. Factors such as interests, social opportunities, emotional rewards, as well as economic benefits influence career choices for all individuals. Career development activities may assist in clarifying and documenting factors key to occupational engagement in addition to facilitating sustained vocational growth through varied and sporadic employment.

### **Career Development Models**

Education for persons with disabilities should focus upon the development of a career. Career counseling is an important component of vocational education (Solly, 1987). However, career development activities should not end with the achievement of vocational tenure in young adulthood. (Hagner & Solomone, 1989). Career education should be a dynamic and lifelong process because persons with intellectual disabilities are always changing. Unfortunately, the rehabilitation system has not applied theories and models of typical career development to mature workers with disabilities (Pumpian et. al., 1997).

Vocational development theories often have not been viewed as applicable to persons with developmental disabilities (Hagner & Salomone, 1989). The interaction of the developmental nature of the disability and developmental nature of career development can lead to a variety of impediments in the career development of persons with developmental disabilities. Without the guiding influence of normative maturation process in areas outside of the vocational arena: social, financial, educational, and emotional, it is difficult to propose a model that is inclusive of the tremendous developmental heterogeneity of individuals who are diagnosed with developmental intellectual disabilities.

Szymanski and Hanley-Maxwell (1996) propose an ecological model of career development for persons with developmental disabilities. The ecological model incorporates the factors important in career interventions regardless of intellectual ability: family, education, planning, functional curriculum, and choice. Interventions focus upon individual factors (i.e., aptitudes), contextual factors (i.e., labor market), meaning factors (i.e., values), work environment factors (i.e., adaptations), and output factors (i.e., productivity expectations).

## Career Development Activities

Career development can be conceptualized as a series of decisions over time. Career development is a lifelong process of getting ready to choose, choosing, and continuing to make choices (Brown et. al., 1996). An assumption of career development is that future job and career choices will be more sophisticated and successful than previous choices (Pumpian et. al., 1997). Consistent with the career development patterns of most adults with moderate to severe forms of mental retardation, regular job movement needs to be considered positively in terms of promotion and career mobility rather than a sign of failure.

A longitudinal approach to occupational development is important. The authors' experience in developing career guidance programs for adults with severe forms of mental retardation suggests that career development activities should include the development of career interests and transferable work behaviors as well as the reframing of existing occupational opportunities to meet individual occupational preferences.

### *Career interests*

Persons with developmental disabilities may lack realistic information on which to base their interests. Job experiences play an important part in developing consistent occupational preference (Hagner & Salomone, 1989). Career interests may be stimulated through short-term job try out experiences that include documentation of preferences and performance. Often, such brief career development opportunities can be incorporated into volunteer, leisure, and activities of daily living.

### *Transferable skills*

Career planning can play a key role in creating a strategy to identify, develop, and maintain vocational skills over a succession of employment opportunities. Individuals with mental retardation often have difficulties generalizing work behavior to new vocational contexts. The development of skills congruent with abilities, aptitudes, and aspirations within multiple vocational contexts can promote employability and career advancement.

### *Reframe existing opportunities*

Career choice presupposes the existence of alternatives from which to choose (Hagner & Salomone, 1989). However, there may be few vocational choices and limited occupational alternatives, especially in rural areas, for persons with more severe forms mental retardation. The courses of occupational change that are common among peers (e.g. relocation) may not be realistic options for persons with developmental disabilities who are more dependent upon family, local case management resources, and often lack the financial means to relocate. Career development activities can identify salient vocational factors critical to consumer satisfaction. Such information can be used to emphasize those features within existing opportunities and create those features when available opportunities have limited opportunity to contribute to the individual's career.

## Conclusion

Career development services are critical elements in alleviating unemployment for adults with severe disabilities (Pumpian et. al., 1997). An expanded view of career interventions includes planned and deliberate programmatic intervention utilizing techniques that are effective with persons with developmental disabilities. "Having a career does not mean being placed in a job but having the opportunity to make choices" (Hagner & Salomone, 1989, p. 154). Like persons without impairments, successful transition to a new occupation is the result of planning, informed choices, and knowledge of risks and rewards.

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