

Complexities in Attracting and Retaining Direct Support Professionals

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ABSTRACT. Recruiting and retaining direct support professionals (DSPs) remains essential to the full inclusion for persons with disabilities. Using a mixed-evaluation model, we measured DSPs' views versus those of their supervisors. DSPs expressed lower perceptions concerning their supervisors, satisfaction with their work situation, and environmental and safety factors. Focus groups provided insights into resolving issues related to compensation, work environment, and recruiting and retaining future DSPs. Motivating factors included wanting to be part of a helping community where all are valued. To improve their performance, DSPs stated their desire to understand the roles of managers and of the consumer. DSPs indicated that having career paths that provided advancement opportunities and direct contact with persons with disabilities were primary motivators. doi:10.1300/J198v06n04_02 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelver@hq.worhpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Direct support professionals (DSPs) provide valuable support as persons with disability increasingly participate and become active members of their communities. These DSPs, who are often BSWs and other social work students, perform an increasingly important role as providers of services to persons with disabilities move from custodial approaches to approaches that emphasize community integration (Scotch, 2001). These individuals typically work in group homes and support persons with disabilities in various ways. The need over the past few decades for increasing the numbers of DSPs has become evident (U.S.: BLS, 2001).

The challenges of recruiting and retaining a skilled and dedicated DSP workforce is well documented (Hewitt, Larson, & Lakin, 2000; Turnham & Dawson, 2003). Methods to attract and retain these individuals are becoming increasingly important, as high turnover rates are common (Hewitt, 2001) as the annual turnover rate for direct support staff in private residential placement is estimated to be above 70% (Mitchell & Braddock, 1994). Given a competitive employment market and the transience of direct support staff, both recruitment and retention of these professionals continues to be major concerns of managers and administrators (Hughes, 1999). In an earlier indication of this emerging problem, human service directors and administrators concluded that finding qualified staff and reducing staff turnover were "the major challenges" that they faced (Larson, 1997).

Quality of life provides a useful construct for planning improvements in the work environment of DSPs. Quality of life metrics gauging improvements in consumers' lives (Zekovic & Renwick, 2003; Varni, Seid & Kurtin, 2001; Rajmil et al., 2004) are rapidly improving. We, however, are only beginning to document quality of life gained from direct support work and the effects on the persons with whom they are working (Balcazar et al., 1998; Bradley & Kimmich, 2003). Individuals currently employed as direct support professionals offer unique insight given the fact that they reflect the success of recruiting and retaining these professionals. These individuals have unique insight as to what will allow for their continued retention, information that may not be available to managers/supervisors.

DSPs typically provide supports within complex social service organizations. These settings represent complex systems where services re-

quire the interconnectedness of consumers, their families, funding sources, and the DSPs (Hudson, 2004; Wolf-Branigin, 2006). These organizations function in close connection to larger social environments through an evolving network of funding opportunities, regulatory standards, and personal relationships (Gleick, 1987; Zhu, 1999). In this study, use of DSP feedback, provides a potential aid in focusing on decision-making processes. This represents the ability of an organization to use information for assuring continued growth and improvement and developing synergies with external sources (Shafritz & Ott, 2001; Johnson, 2002).

Investigating decision-making influences creates a framework for understanding the significance of evolving combinations of exigencies. Negative feedback represents information generated internally in a closed system (e.g., the human service organization) and facilitates continual improvement. The feedback received by these organizations demonstrate how DSPs can internalize the impacts of the opportunities and expectations provided to them as they support persons with disabilities and seek a career path. They can use this feedback in their decisions to plan their career path, and may use additional information from outside this system to consider new employment or advancement. Using this feedback aids in keeping these DSPs working for an organization and assists in maintaining organizational equilibrium and routine functioning (Proehl, 2001).

Empowerment theory (Solomon, 1976) and community normalization (Wolfensberger, 1984) provide useful background in understanding and planning for the emerging needs of these DSPs and understanding their interconnectedness to consumers. Because DSPs have skills and values needed by this growing sector, these individuals have the potential to become more empowered. Likewise, because of the continual trend towards inclusion, persons with disabilities are becoming more involved in their communities with their peers without disabilities. Within these theories, DSPs often provide support and advocacy by facilitating the possibility of seeing people positively, act to remove barriers that obstruct their lives, and deal with encouraging power and control of the person's life.

Direct support professionals work in social contexts that reflect human differences and complexity. These contexts reflect four assumptions concerning human relations theory. These assumptions include the idea that organization exists to address and meet human needs, interdependencies exist between the organization and the persons working within it, both the organization and these persons need to meet each

other's needs, and this good "fit" between the organization and these persons provides mutual assistance (Shafritz & Ott, 2001). In addition to the basic human relations theory components that include productivity, a rewards system, and inclusion through communication (Etzioni, 1964; Peters & Waterman, 1982); these individuals share basic assumptions that define organizational culture (Schein, 1992), as they encourage persons with disabilities become fully participating citizens of their communities.

The development of an empowering and supportive culture emerges from the daily interactions and efforts of the DSPs. They continually need to apply their own skills and knowledge, while adapting to new external situations (Morgan, 1997). As the DSPs adapt, they continually evolve their work culture. Hasenfeld (2000) further elaborates on this issue by encouraging social service workers and their organizations to adopt organizational management techniques and models that account for the diverse and competing expectations of their key stakeholders. In such settings, DSPs serve as a primary mechanism to facilitate inclusion for persons with disabilities, while resolving and avoiding conflicts within increasingly complex social situations (Reed, 1996).

To understand the preferences and concerns related to attracting and retaining DSPs, we requested that a cohort of these individuals and their supervisors respond to a questionnaire developed to measure these attitudes and preferences. This included identifying the factors that keep these workers satisfied and productive (Graham & Pettinato, 2001; Layard, 2005), and to better understand their internal environment (Montana & Charnov, 1993). The studies indicate that while individuals in societies may be accumulating greater wealth and higher incomes, they are not necessarily increasing their life satisfaction. These individuals were seeking intrinsic value of their profession and life choices.

Given the limited resources provided by most governmental funding sources for significant and immediate increases, other factors that demonstrate improvements in worker satisfaction provide a promising alternative. This paper attempts to answer two questions:

1. Are DSPs perceptions concerning their supervisors, satisfaction with their work environment and safety factors different from their managers/supervisors?
2. What lessons can DSPs provide in solving issues related to compensation, work environment, and recruiting and retaining future DSPs?

METHOD

Sample

The sample included 51 direct support professionals (DSPs) and 38 Managers/supervisors. These individuals were identified by an organization dedicated to improving community awareness of their work; securing access to quality education; and securing better wages, benefits and job security for these individuals. The vast majority of the DSPs (76%) had a high school diploma or associates degree. An additional 37 managers/supervisors completed the questionnaire for comparison purposes.

Questionnaire Design and Analysis

In this mixed-model approach, we used two methods to collect data from the participants. In the first, DSPs and managers/supervisors responded to a 24 item questionnaire was distributed that identified the participant's position, length of employment, wage, desired wage, and 17 Likert scaled questions (on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree). These 17 questions ranged from knowledge of the organization for which they were working to whether they enjoy their job. The questionnaire items were developed, based on the input from direct support professionals, and refined by two professionals providing technical assistance over a two-year period to organizations on empowering both consumers and the DSPs who supported them. DSPs alone provided suggestions, within focus group format, for enhancing their status and improving the work environment.

Descriptive statistics and group comparisons using Mann-Whitney U-tests for individual items and Independent t-tests for composite scores were calculated. These were used to compare DSPs perceptions versus their managers/supervisors. One overriding question drove the questionnaire-evaluation process, "*What factors lead to direct support professionals choosing to remain at their current position?*"

Development of Attributes

We computed three indices by creating composite scores based on a variety of test items. The first index, supervisory, included four items:

- I like my supervisor

- My supervisor supports me
- My supervisor asks for ideas
- My supervisor uses my ideas.

The second index, liking the people for whom and with the DSP works, used three items:

- Helping people is important to me
- I love the people with disabilities for whom they work
- I like my coworkers.

The final index, environmental factors, included six items:

- I work close to home
- I feel safe when I work
- I could work other jobs if wanted to
- I like the routine of position
- I know what is expected
- I enjoy my work.

To determine the item reliability, Cronbach's alphas were calculated for each of the three indices.

Focus Groups and Analysis

The second method of data collection involved working in groups of 6-10 participants to discuss issues vital to direct support professional recruitment and retention. We conducted six focus groups, each ranged in length from 75 to 90 minutes, with a brief break mid way through the session. The participating individuals were the same as those who had completed the questionnaire, with 47 people participating in the focus groups.

Based in concerns identified in the questionnaire, focus group participants initially responded to six open-ended questions:

- What innovative ideas has your employer used to *recruit* caring, qualified direct support professionals?
- What innovative ideas has your employer used to *retain* caring, qualified direct support professionals?
- What *could your employer do* to recruit and retain caring qualified direct support professionals?
- What innovative ideas has your employer used to increase direct

- support professional *wages*?
- What innovative ideas has your employer used to increase direct support professional *benefits*?
- What *could your employer do* to increase direct support professional wages and benefits?

Each group of participants took 10 minutes to respond to each question. Comments were recorded using a tape recorder and were written on newsprint to assure that the concepts accurately reflected the participants' views. Data analysis was based on three individuals reviewing the audio and written records of each focus group session. Themes that had been stated in at least three of the six sessions were identified. These formed the basis for the recommendations.

RESULTS

The sample was 10.3% male and 89.7% female, with 8.5% of the participants claiming to have a disability. The direct support professionals had worked in the field from one to 20 years ($M = 7.3$ years, $SD = 5.51$), with 64.9% remaining with the same employer. They worked for both local mental health authorities (5.9%) and a variety of not-for-profit organizations that had contractual relations with the local mental health boards (94.1%). The average length of time with current employer approached seven years (6.69). DSPs who responded had held 1.28 jobs during the past year (Table 1).

Cronbach's alpha (α) for each of the three indices were, $\alpha = .905$ for supervisory; $\alpha = .685$ for liking the people for whom and with whom I work; and $\alpha = .747$ for environmental factors. The average hourly wage of the 51 DSPs was \$9.88 per hour ($S.D. = 2.651$). On average these same individuals believed \$12.58 ($S.D. = 3.767$) would be a fair wage for their current efforts (a difference of \$2.70 per hour).

On the issue of the supervisory relationships, DSPs stated they liked their supervisor (75.6%), believed their supervisor supported them (71.4%), felt their supervisor asked for their ideas (60%), and saw their supervisor using their ideas (58.3%). This illustrates different aspects of direct support professional/supervisor relationships and the degree to which supervisors include their employees in the problem solving process.

Direct support professional, however, did responded lower on each of the 17 individual test items than did the managers/supervisors (Table

TABLE 1. Participant Characteristics

	Direct Support Professional	Manager/Supervisor
Gender		
Male	N= 4 (7.8%)	N=5 (13.2%)
Female	N= 47 (92.2%)	N= 33 (86.8%)
Has a Disability		
Yes	N= 7 (13.7%)	N= 3 (7.9%)
No	N= 44 (86.3%)	35 (92.1%)
Family Member Has Disability		
Yes	N = 24 (47.1%)	N= 18(47.4%)
No	N = 27 (52.9%)	N = 20 (52.6%)
Years with Current Employer		
Mean	6.69	7.97
N	51	38
St. dev.	4.969	5.866
Fair Wage For Current Position		
Mean	\$12,58*our	\$14,23*our
N	48	24
Sr. dev	3.954	3.240
Current Wage For DSP Position		
Mean	\$9,8R.1iour	
N	47	
St. dev	3.00.1	
DSP Jobs in Three Years		
Mean	1.28	
N	43	
St. dev	.504	

2). On several items, DSPs expressed scores significantly lower on the Mann-Whitney U-tests than their managers/supervisors. These included: understanding the agency's mission ($Z = -2.138$; $p = .032$), likes their supervisor ($Z = -2.003$; $p = .031$), the supervisor supports them ($Z = -2.738$; $p = .006$), supervisor asks for ideas ($Z = -2.067$; $p = .039$), they like their coworkers ($Z = -2.595$; $p = .009$), feel safe when at work ($Z = -.2.798$; $p = .005$), likes routine of the position ($Z = -2.022$; $p = .043$), and enjoys the work ($Z = -2.159$; $p = .031$).

Comparisons between the answers given by the managers/supervisors and direct support professionals (Table 3) revealed that on all three sets of measures (quality of supervision, liking people, environment of the job) supervisors/manager thought that direct support professionals had higher levels of satisfaction than did the direct support professionals themselves ($\alpha = 0.05$). One area of evaluation involved assessing the strength of the relationship between the DSP and their supervisor. Direct Support professionals endorsed varying levels of agreement with these statements. The highest level of agreement focused on the DSP

TABLE 2. Direct Support Professionals versus Supervisors/Manager on Individual Items

Item	DSP Mean Ranks(N)	Supervisor Mean Ranks (N)	Mann-Whitney U score	Z	p-value
Understand aunty's mission	39.41 (43)	49.92 (38)	706.0	-2.138	.032*
Work for a very* very large agency	42.95 (49)	45.36 (38)	879.5	-.461	.645
Agency has P small overhead	38.53 (48)	48.80(37)	673.5	-2.001	.045*
Agency does a lot of fundraising	43.85 (48)	43.05(38)	895.0	-.152	.879
Likes supervisor	18.3X1491	49.29(36)	655.5	-2.1(i)	.111*
Supervisor supports	36.76 (49)	50.54 (35)	576.0	-2.739	.006**
Supervisor asks for ideas	39.01 (50)	49.74(36)	675.5	-2.067	.039*
Supervisor uses ideas	.18.77(48)	47.47 (36)	685.0	-1.604	.090
Helping people is important	41.24(49)	44.26 (35)	7*..(i)	.Mm	.374
Love the people for whom working	41.94 (47)	44.32(38]	843.0	-.021	.534
Like coworkers	38.77 (50)	52.04 (38)	663.5	-2.595	.009**
Works close to home	40.52 (50)	48.70 (37)	751.0	-1.552	.121
Feel safe when 1 work	37.38 (49)	51.61 (37)	606.5	-2.798	.005**
Could work for other jobs if wanted to	40.66 (49)	47.26(37)	767.5	-1,283	.200
Likes the routine of position	40.02 (50)	30.30 (38)	72..(i)	-2.022	.043'
Know what is expected from me	39.49 (48)	4K.57(2,K)	719.5	-1.828	.068
Enjoys work	40.10 (50)	50.29(38)	730.0	-2.159	.031*

Significant at <.05 level.

** Significant at <.01 level.

liking their supervisor and believing that their supervisor supported them. Unexpectedly, DSPs stated a higher level of agreement with supervisors using their ideas than they did that supervisors asked them for their ideas.

Several themes emerging from the questionnaire relate to focus group recommendations, these included:

- Improving the work environment by offering more flexible scheduling and differential compensation for late hour and weekend shifts
- Improving choice and provision of health benefits
- Facilitating a friendly *family-oriented* work environment where the DSPs contributions were better recognized
- Involving consumers and other DSPs in hiring procedures to assure that new hires are *person-centered*
- Providing consistent training for new hires

These themes provide the basis for improving the factors underlying the successful recruitment and retention of DSPs

TABLE 3. Group Comparisons by Composite Scores

Composites	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	p-value
Supervisory				-2.455	79	.1116"
Direct Support Professional	46	3.8152	.88260			
Supervisor/Manager	35	4.2643	.71728			
Liking People				-2.048	81	.044*
Direct Support Professional	47	4.4611	.63912			
Supervisor/Manager	35	4.6857	.34245			
Environmental				-3.044	83	.003*
Direct Support Professional	49	3.6837	.91112			
Supervisor/Manager	36	4.2639	.80610			

Significant at $\alpha = .05$ level.

** Significant at $< .01$ level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the differences in attitudes provided by the DSPs and their managers/supervisory, the following opinions and insights provided by the DSPs suggest ways to improve salary and compensation; their work environment; and the recruitment, retention, and training.

Salary and Compensation. Recommendations regarding salary fell into two broad categories: scheduling and career advancement. DSPs ask for flexible shifts, including the option for flexible time-off. They sought recognition from their managers/supervisors that some times during the week were more desirable. Undesirable times, including nights, weekends, and holidays, need rewards in the form of increased compensation. Many participants suggested that veteran staffers receive priority in choosing the schedule they will work. When talking about time-off, participants also stated that they would like flexibility in time off including being able to take partial days off, and being able to combine sick days and vacation time.

Participants were looking for flexibility in scheduling and greater opportunity for career advancement. DSPs seek rewards for their increasing expertise. This was demonstrated in both their desire for managers to consider promoting from within their organizations, and in their desire for gradual pay increases based on periodic performance evaluation. Respondents further stated that they would like greater access to information regarding how funds are budgeted, in order to understand how and why individuals are paid at their current rates. Further, they suggested that direct support professionals may be able to use this information to find ways for the company to save money, and should be re-

warded when they take such initiative. They appear to be looking for greater empowerment, and increased rewards as they contribute to the organization's successful functioning.

While career advancement and salary concerns are one of these professional's chief concerns, participants also are looking for increased access to non-cash benefits. A concern mentioned frequently was the need for immediate access to health care benefits. Direct support professionals expressed a need for access to health care services designed to meet diverse needs, and a willingness to sacrifice wages in order to access such benefits. Accomplishing this may include allowing part-time employees to purchase benefit packages that are available to full-time employees, as well as giving employees the option of increased benefits and a decrease in earned wages. While access to services is important, access to specific types of services is also a concern. Employees are looking for the opportunity to choose between several health care providers to determine coverage that best fits their needs.

Work Environment. DSPs also expressed a need for fewer tangible assets that included creating a friendly, caring, family-like work environment. Suggestions included hiring supervisors that are sensitive to DSPs needs, and are willing to listen to them, recognizing direct support professionals achievements, and celebrating gains in performance. Other suggestions included making the atmosphere friendlier, recognizing employees via recognition boards and weekly or monthly awards, and communicating more with outside organizations. Networking with advocacy groups and other service providers may allow direct support professionals a greater sense of connectedness and more options for meeting consumers' needs. DSPs suggested creating in-house newsletters to disseminate information and recognize service. These suggestions belie a myriad of opportunities for increasing positive communication and growing a sense of community among existing employees.

Recruitment, Retention and Training. Direct support professionals want a workplace that functions as a community. Suggestions included creating a workplace that involves consumers and direct support staff in recruiting, hiring and retaining staff. Using direct support professionals network of knowledge about available applicants as well as canvassing job fairs and employment agencies will help create a diverse, qualified workforce. Involving the consumers, direct support staff, and managers in the interview will help ensure that all individuals feel empowered to create a healthy workplace. Creating policy and job-requirement documents to disseminate to current and prospective employees is one way

to increase communication and clarify roles in the organization. This may have a double benefit in that it prepares current employees for the process of interviewing, and may clarify questions current DSPs themselves have about their duties.

While an emphasis on clearly defined roles is important to direct support professionals, they also express a need to assess incoming staff commitment to values central to person-centered planning. These include the willingness to listen to other staff and the consumer, treating everyone with dignity, compassion, and willingness to recognize others good work and effort. The essence of comments to this effect is that professionals want to feel as though they are part of a caring community where everyone is valued, and each person's input receives consideration.

When selecting new employees, DSPs suggest designating a single person or department as being primarily responsible for coordinating training activities. This avoids confusion regarding who is responsible for training incoming direct support professionals. To create qualified, knowledgeable staff, they desire a thorough orientation period that builds specific competencies through further training. Training should also focus on creating communication strategies that minimize conflict and maximize problem solving, should be sensitive to the diverse needs and talents of individuals from other cultures, rewards staff for effort and competence, and ultimately facilitates the creation of an appropriate environment for consumers to grow.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Social workers continue to fill the roles of DSPs and their managers/supervisors. BSWs and social work students fill roles as direct support professionals where these individuals gain experience early in their careers. MSWs more likely have positions with supervisory or managerial responsibilities. To assure that these workers are functioning in order to support persons with disabilities, managers/supervisors must realize that DSPs indicated consistently lower perceptions than their managers/supervisors regarding supervision, liking with whom and for who they work, and environment and safety of the workplace.

These findings highlight key aspects that managers and administrators should consider in these frequently chaotic environments. Factors motivating the DSPs to continue functioning in these complex systems include the need for appreciation, their desire to be part of a helping community where all are valued, and their opportunity for professional

and personal development. These organizational attractors appeared to provide powerful incentives for maintaining the DSPs' involvement (Wolf-Branigin & Duke, in press). Assuming that these organizations function as complex systems because they include variables interacting to create a system behavior and appear to be relatively stable over time (Svyantek & Brown, 2000), the DSPs expressed a need to improve their work environment. They stated that they would benefit from improved communication regarding administrative matters, and stated their need to be recognized and rewarded for their accomplishments in the workplace.

These data remain valuable in providing insight into DSPs' motivation for remaining in the direct support field. This comes at a time when it is increasingly important to use employee input in order to improve recruitment and retention. The DSPs suggested ways of recruiting, hiring, and retaining future direct support professionals in order to ensure sustaining a positive caring environment that supports persons with disabilities and offer a beginning point for dialogue between managers, DSPs and consumers that potentially can improve direct support professionals' morale and quality of life. While these DSPs continue supporting consumers with their inclusion, they likewise have needs. Given the diverse pressures that they encounter from families, friends, and employment demands, the DSPs appear to choose this profession because of the intrinsic and empowering values (Gutierrez, 1997; Bartle et al., 2002).

Empowering values include the opportunities for career advancement and the possibility of supporting a person who appreciates their efforts. While being a DSP does not typically provide high monetary value, it leads to a career path for many who seek advancement and direct contact with persons with disabilities. These findings are consistent with the value placed on the intrinsic aspects of their employment and the need to maintain a balance in their lives. Direct support professionals are likely key targets for future unionization efforts as high turnover and "burnout" from role stressors take heavy tolls on employment longevity (Itzhaky & Aviad-Hierbloom, 1998). Whether unionization occurs or not, organizational managers can take steps to assure that an open dialogue between DSPs and managers, participation in organizational decision-making and facilitation of collaborative peer relations occur in order to foster their empowerment (Wallach & Mueller, 2006).

The primary limitation of this study is generalizability because data were collected from only one cohort. In addition to investigating other cohorts, future studies should focus on the complexity and inner-

connectedness of the DSPs social networks. This may involve methods including social network analysis (Wasserman & Faust, 1995) and the further application of complex systems theory (Netting, Kettner, & McMurry, 2004) in order to understand the multiple interactions from work, family and other sources that the DSP encounters.

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