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## A longitudinal study of employment and skill acquisition among individuals with developmental disabilities

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### Abstract

Recent legislation, especially the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, generated the closure of institutions for people with disabilities and inclusion into community residences and employment. It has been well documented that individuals with developmental disabilities often experience difficulties with employment including both obtaining and maintaining jobs, and many researchers have looked for ways to make employment more successful [McConkey, R. & Mezza F. (2001). Employment aspirations of people with learning disabilities attending day centers. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 5(4), 309–318; Stevens, G. (2002). Employers' perceptions and practice in the employability of disabled people: a survey of companies in south east UK. *Disability and Society*, 17(7), 779–796; Capella, M., Roessler, R., & Hemmeria, K. (2002). Work-related skills awareness in high-school students with disabilities. *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling*, 33(2), 17–23; Ingraham, K., Rahimi, M., Tsang, H., Chan, F., & Oulvey, E. (2001). Work support groups in state vocational rehabilitation agency settings: a case study. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Skills*, 5(1), 6–21; Gosling, V. & Cotterill, L. (2000). An employment project as a route to social inclusion for people with learning difficulties? *Disability and Society*, 15(7), 1001–1018; Neitupski, J. & Hamre-Nietupski, S. (2000). A systematic process for carving supported employment positions for people with severe disabilities. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 12(2), 103–119].

While research has accumulated that has examined predictors of successful employment, this research assessed longitudinal outcomes of employment. Data were obtained from an existing data

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set of all known persons receiving services from the Developmental Disabilities Division of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services ( $N = 2760$ ). Results indicated that as people moved to employment, scores on adaptive skills increased, that as people moved from employment, adaptive skills decreased, and that as employment status remained constant, adaptive skills also remained unchanged. No consistent impact was found on challenging behaviors. Type of employment (sheltered, supported, and competitive) was then examined, and the same pattern of changes in adaptive skills was found; i.e., changes in employment to more/less competitive was accompanied by more/less adaptive skills. This suggests that employment itself, especially work in the competitive workforce, may be a significant source of enhancing adaptive skills for people with developmental disabilities and, thus, greatly adding to the success of community living.

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## 1. Introduction

Employment, as a form of social integration, may influence consumer satisfaction (Eliason, 1998) and various measures of well-being (Fabian, 1992; Eggleton, Robertson, Ryan, & Kober, 1999; Preiebe, Warner, Hubschmid, & Eckle, 1998; Lustig & Thomas, 1997) among individuals with developmental disabilities. Successful community residence virtually requires research examining issues necessary to sustain inclusion. People with disabilities often experience employment difficulties and a great deal of research has been conducted on this issue (Capella, Roessler, & Hemmeria, 2002; Gosling & Cotterill, 2000; Ingraham, Rahimi, Tsang, Chan, & Oulvey, 2001; McConkey & Mezza, 2001; Neitupski & Hamre-Nietupski, 2000; Stevens, 2002).

Some research has focused on positive impacts of maintaining employment as well as the possibility that employment positively impacts various well-being measures. While most of this literature has focused on predictors of successful employment, even the research examining outcomes of employment has generated mixed results. Lehman (1988) and Fabian (1989), for example, found no relationship between employment status and various measures of well-being for persons with mental illnesses. Fabian (1992), on the other hand, found significant differences between persons employed in supported employment in comparison to persons who could be employed in supported employment but were not yet placed. Preiebe et al. (1998) found that employed people diagnosed with schizophrenia had significant advantages in respect to their well-being, life satisfaction, and financial situations. Eggleton, Robertson, Ryan, & Kober (1999) found that employment positively impacted the lives of people with intellectual disabilities when comparing those who were in open employment, supported employment, or unemployed.

More recently, Robinson (2000) found that paid employment was important to the self-esteem and quality of life of people with disabilities, and Gillies, Knight, and Baglioni (1998) found that people with and without vision impairments viewed employment as equally important in their lives. Lam and Rosenheck (2000) found that employment was a correlate with improved well-being among the homeless with mental illnesses.

While this literature tends to suggest that employment may generate improved lives and greater skills, there has been almost no research found to date that has documented such

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