

You First Episode 31: Finding and Keeping Quality Employment

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Keith Casebonne: Hey there, I'm Keith Casebonne. Welcome to this episode of the You First podcast. If you are new to the show or just haven't gotten to it yet, please subscribe so you are notified of new episodes automatically.

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As you might know, October is National Disability Employment Awareness month. We wanted to bring some awareness to a group right here in Florida that created some amazing resources, to help people with disabilities find and keep quality employment.

To talk much more about that are my guests, Danielle McGill, the founder of Empower Possibilities and a disability consultant, advocate, and public speaker, and Wendy Vance, an advocate investigator at Disability Rights Florida.

Hey, Danielle and Wendy. Thanks so much for being my guest today. You're both have been or are current members of a cadre called the Florida Developmental Disability Network Collaborative Leadership Program.

I want to hear a little more about that, the focus on some of the work you've done related to employment over the last few years. Tell us a little bit about what the cadre is? How it was formed? What its goals were?

Wendy Vance: It was developed, there were four agencies who sat on the steering committee with that. The Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, the Mailman Center, Disability Rights Florida, and Florida Center for Inclusive Communities. Danielle, please correct me [laughs] wrong.

Danielle McGill: You're right.

Wendy: They formed it and decided to do this leadership project. The leadership project involves...

Danielle: The initiatives in closing the gaps between different services among the developmental disabilities population in our state.

Wendy: Right, and the leadership vacuum that they're expecting to come up as people begin to retire and move on, to train up those leaders who are coming behind so that there will be leaders within the developmental disabilities community.

The applications were put out to both self-advocates, as well as people who work in the field. There were several of us that fit into both of those categories, where both Danielle and myself, were self-advocates and we work in the field.

Based on those applications, they hand-selected the eight of us that started out in that first year. Although, we had seven in the first year. I think it was still seven in the second year, and we were a four in the third year.

Keith: The goal of the cadre is primarily related to employment, but it started out a little more multifaceted?

Wendy: Yes. We started out looking at multiple issues within the Developmental Disabilities community. In the first year, we settled on two different projects. One related to transportation, and one related to employment.

Danielle and myself worked on the group that focused was on employment, and so then, our employment efforts continued over the next two years.

Keith: The cadre has supported several mentors I know, representing some different state national dis-body organizations. It seems like there's multiple goals.

I know one of the original goals was to create a whitepaper related to making employment a better option, or the search for employment and attaining employment smoother for people with disabilities.

Danielle: Easier. Giving the individual the power, the information, and the ability to make supportive decisions when searching, gaining, and advancing in their employments with their job coach, employment specialists, or agency that's helping them to find a job such as VR, or any other nonprofit organization like CareerSource and so forth.

To giving them the tools that they need to succeed throughout the whole process of finding employment.

Wendy: In the first year when we started, we started out exploring, doing a research on what the specific issues were related to employment here in Florida.

Danielle, myself, and our other two group members, Natalie Jean and Mindy Stevens, who can't be here today, we worked on surveying, not only service providers, but hosting a focus group more with some employers to talk about their outreach to people with disabilities, what they've been doing, what has been working for them, what has not, and what has...

Danielle: Their barriers?

Wendy: Yup, barriers.

Keith: From that research, you all put together a whitepaper with a number of recommendations. Let's talk about some of the stuff that you guys discovered in your research, you put in the whitepaper. What are some of those barriers that you found, and some of the recommendations to maybe overcome some of those?

Danielle: The first thing that we worked on as a cadre was defining what integrated competitive employment meant because for many advocates and for agencies across Florida, they all have different meanings. They define it differently. As far as integrated competitive employment means equal pay for equal work, number one.

Number two is being able to work alongside their able-bodied peers, to be able to advance and to gain experience and also the benefits that come with a job. We had to define what that meant for us, and that's how we saw it.

Wendy: In our initial findings in that initial research and talking to employers, some of the things that we found out is some employers felt that they didn't have access to quality applicants, or any applicants with a disability in some cases.

They wanted people with disabilities to apply and they had active efforts, but they were finding it difficult to find candidates. They were looking for people to come and apply, and wanted to be more a part of that process...

Danielle: And the resources to help them accommodate the accommodations for the individual to pursue work to obtain and do those tasks that they're asked to do on the job as well. There wasn't enough training in the employer and the individual, we found in our white paper as well.

Keith: It sounds like, though, that many of the employers you talked to seemed very interested. Did you get a lot of resistance, or you mostly got some people saying, "Gosh, we'd like to do this better. We just need some help?"

Wendy: For the people that we surveyed, the ones that responded were very interested. They did want to be a part of the process. They wanted more applicants with disabilities and wanted to understand more about what applicants with disabilities could do, and like I said, have an access to those clients.

Like I said, for the ones that responded, they were very interested in that. They even asked if we could do an annual focus group to talk about these issues because they felt it was great to come to the table and talk to each other about their experience with candidates with disabilities and employees with disabilities and how to be more helpful.

Danielle: Now we're getting through COVID hopefully all the way, you're seeing more employers willing and wanting to hire people with disabilities on all parts of the spectrum and willing to accommodate remote work as well for individuals.

Keith: One positive of the pandemic and working at home seems to be the acceptance now of work-from-home in a lot of aspects, which can only increase opportunities for a lot of people. That's great.

You've defined the problem. You've talked to employers trying to find out what they need, what they want. What are some of the ideas you guys came up with as to how to make the process better for them, some of the recommendations?

Danielle: We worked with Employment First and with the FTDC. We developed those scorecard that walked the individual from point A to point D of how to look for a job, maintain a job, keep

a job, what they find that's difficult, what's great about their job, from the ability of personal approach instead of a test approach, like I call it.

The scorecard gave the individuals the power and information they need to participate in the whole process in easy plain language, which is really important for people with developmental disabilities, to have that people-first language, as well as plain language when it comes to developing resources and information.

Wendy: We continued that work into year three, not so much with the toolkit because that was a product arising out of the whitepaper.

In year three, we specifically focused on what employment looked like in COVID, how to utilize some of the things that have come out of COVID, like Danielle was saying, and employers' willingness to hire virtually.

We also looked at what the job market looked like pre-COVID, what the impact was on individuals with disabilities, and looks at the types of jobs that were lost and how many individuals with disabilities lost jobs.

Danielle: Hospitality sector.

Wendy: Right, and how many people lost jobs in sight of that. We were going for the idea to use this time to utilize the new tools like remote work and things to help people find more quality employment that is salaried and benefitted, and that is a little bit more resistant to losing jobs.

In part of that, we did a statewide survey of job coaches, employment placement specialists, and other professionals, as well as self-advocates and individuals with disabilities to find out what their experiences have been during COVID and their suggestions for the future.

From that, of course, we developed the training that we did that was hosted by the Florida Center for Inclusive Communities, and developed a sample what we thought would be a best practices for job coach employment specialists as they're working with clients with disabilities and looking for that quality employment that meets the client's needs and their informed choice.

Danielle: I want to say this. It may sound wrong for me to say. Not just working for Publix or for McDonald's, but real...Not saying that they're not real careers, but more...Look at me and Wendy. We have degrees so we're capable of doing more. We don't expect ourselves to be working at a fast food restaurant.

If you're able and you have the ability to do it, to obtain a full-time or part-time job, whatever your situation is, I say go for it. It's worth a shot. The best practices help job coaches I see look beyond just the ordinary jobs that they choose for the individuals.

They're actually giving them a choice to decide what they want to do, what direction they want to lead in. That's the whole point of it. They also develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Employment encompasses it all.

Keith: Indeed. You both mentioned job coaches a couple of times. What exactly is a job coach? What makes a good job coach? How do people with disabilities get a job coach?

Wendy: We'll start with, what is a job coach? Danielle, help me out here as needed. A job coach is basically an individual that works with you on...

Danielle: Who is trained?

Wendy: Yes, who is trained, let's start with that, to work with you as a person with disability, to help you find a job, to help you learn the...

Danielle: Your strengths and weaknesses. What type of jobs that are out there based on your strengths and weaknesses. What sector will fit you the best.

Wendy: A job coach goes with you to the job to help you learn the job. Basically, to provide some additional layer of training which is specific to you and what your needs are. We go beyond what the employer would typically give you to stuff that is more specific to you and how you accomplish the task of the job.

They usually start where they're more present at the beginning. As time goes by, they will fade back. A person can be both, what is called an employment specialist and a job coach, or they can be separate roles where the employment specialist is helping you with the finding the job part of it and all that, and then a job coach is brought in.

Danielle: Helping you write your resume, teaching you how to answer those interview questions, how to ask for accommodations, what to do in different scenarios when you're on the job. All that type of stuff.

Wendy: Then, can also provide support to an individual at a job interview to help with answering questions or that kind of thing, although their role is be in the background.

They can be there for support and maybe help with some things, but like I said, they're to be in the background and let the person with the disability shine.

As far as your question as where to get one, there's a couple of different ways to go about that. Vocational rehabilitation can assist with the job coach during that initial...

Danielle: You must qualify and be eligible with the disability.

Wendy: That job coach is not going to be a permanent fixture for you. They're going to be there until your case is closed or you're transferred over to a different service provider for those extended services. You can also get a job coach through APD.

Danielle: Agency for Persons with Disabilities. They have vendors as well all over the state. You could talk to your support coordinator as well if you're on the waiver.

Wendy: They also have some dollars for people who are on the waitlist to help with employment placement and supports.

Keith: At least it gives people...they know where to turn. If someone's listening who has a disability and is trying to get better employment, then they can contact a vocational rehabilitation or APD. You've mentioned the scorecard and the toolkit. Is that one and the same?

Is the toolkit essentially a way to fill out the scorecard and then see how you rank or are they two different things?

Danielle: They're in the kit itself, both items. When you go throughout the toolkit, you'll be using the scorecard to...I see it as a rubric to grade your employment specialist and to grade your efforts as the individual seeking employment.

It's like it gives them criteria to meet, as well as an outline of what to work on with the individual and how to do better.

It's helped to improve the system of job coaches and employment specialists to close the gap, especially when it comes to communication and decision-making. We emphasize on the individual's right to choose what they want to do.

Keith: You can identify the strengths and weaknesses and then target the improvement on where it's needed?

Danielle: Exactly.

Keith: Are those available just generally to people with disabilities or are they mostly used by job coaches, other employment specialists, or job service providers?

Danielle: It could be used with agencies, with job coaches, employment specialist individuals, whoever would benefit from when they're seeking a job, when they're trying to obtain a job and advancing within their job, and working with their job coach one-on-one or in a group setting. It depends on their situation.

Wendy: If I'm not mistaken, FDDC was going to publish that toolkit on their website, correct?

Danielle: Yes.

Wendy: So that it can be accessible by clients.

Danielle: It's being seen on a federal level and a state level, the whitepaper. Florida's paving the way.

Keith: What are some of the other current, or even future goals for the cadre? What are next steps working on and where do you see things going?

Wendy: We have ended the project actually in year three. As far as I know, they haven't come back to us to say that we're going to do anymore. We ended it with the training that we did on the 27th of August.

That will be published and be available on the FCIC, Florida Center for Inclusive Communities, website in the near future. That training will be there and available for anybody who wants to pick it up and listen to it.

As far as we know, that's going to be the end of the program, although I do think that they may be looking to do another cadre or class at some point in the future. For our group, we are done at this time.

Danielle: I know that FDDC has other initiatives. The cadre members are a part of the advocacy summit next year. It was postponed this year due to COVID and the Delta variant. I know that they're going to focus on employment, transportation, and housing.

Maybe my thinking is they're going to use the information that we created to share with other self-advocates and other agencies at that advocacy summit. It'll be interesting to see how it all comes together and plays out.

Keith: It sure will. Thank you guys so much for explaining all this. It's really encouraging and it is nice to see this positive direction. It's nice to know that employers are seeking to hire more people with disabilities and more receptive.

Danielle: More inclusive.

Keith: Yeah, more inclusive. Thank you both Danielle and Wendy. I really appreciate your time.

Wendy: You're so welcome. I'm so excited to talk about this and excited to see a move towards that more quality employment, so that people with disabilities can have some of the same advantages as their non-disabled counterparts, and take part in what we all like to call our little American dream.

It's hard to take part in that when their bank account is slim. It's good to see people being able to have those opportunities.

Danielle: Absolutely.

Keith: Thank you both. Thanks again to Danielle McGill and Wendy Vance for being our guests. Check the show notes for information on where you can find the resources Danielle and Wendy talked about in this episode. Thank you for listening to the You First podcast or reading the transcript online.

Please email any feedback questions or ideas about the show to podcast@risabilityrightsflorida.org.

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