



The *“Dub!”* Factor

THE DISABILITY BUSINESS

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

A plethora of government-funded services are offered to people with disabilities and their families. Just thinking about the word—*services*—warms the cockles of many hearts. Recipients of services are often grateful for the help they receive; providers of services may be proud of their efforts to help others. This, however, is a view from afar. Up close, things may look differently.

While presenting at conferences across the country, I have the pleasure of learning from many different people (including people who have been labeled, their families, and people who provide services). I’m chilled by many of the stories I hear which demonstrate a frightening state of affairs: services represent more than benevolent help or legal entitlements. Human services for people with disabilities represent Big (Disability) Business!

Monica has worked for a discount store for three years and still has a full-time, one-on-one job coach, who is employed by a human services agency. Why, after three apparently successful years on the job, does Monica still have a job coach? Some might answer that Monica’s success is due entirely to her having a job coach. But agencies that have moved to “best practices” ensure that a job coach helps a person become successful at work, in the shortest amount of time, and in the most unobtrusive manner. Furthermore—and again, within the context of best practices—many job coaches are no longer human services employees, but are, instead, the real-life coworkers who assist a new employee who has a disability. This simply mirrors what happens in the Real World when a new employee *without* a disability is helped by coworkers.

Susan, Monica’s Service Coordinator, insists Monica couldn’t do the job without a one-on-one job coach. If this is true, has anyone considered that perhaps this isn’t the right job for Monica? And if *this* is a possibility, why hasn’t anyone helped her find a job she could do successfully *without* a full-time job coach? But here’s the bigger question: why isn’t anyone helping Monica learn how to get a job *on her own*? (Many people with disabilities have said the best jobs they ever had were the ones they got on their own.)

Could it be that Monica is too valuable as an income-generating source? First, if Monica was placed in a job in which she used the natural supports of coworkers, instead of a paid job coach, that job coach would no longer be needed, which might put *his* job in jeopardy! Second, if the agency helped Monica and other “clients” learn how to get jobs on their own, some of the agency staffers would no longer be needed, and they would lose *their* jobs! The agency receives funds from the government to pay for all the people who help Monica, and they earn far greater salaries than Monica. She is, in effect, a cash cow—generating thousands of dollars of income for the agency and its staff. Is it any wonder Monica will continue to be described by others as “needing so much help”? *Dub!*

Similar situations occur across all arenas of disability services. For example, parents are urged to take advantage of all the services available to their young children. If enough of them decline these services, early intervention/early childhood staffers might lose their jobs! Think about other age groups and other types of services . . .

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This is more about human nature—and supply and demand—than a criticism of human services providers. Told another way, consider a widget saleswoman. When she calls on a business, hoping to become the company’s widget supplier, her natural instinct is to estimate what the company needs, *as well as how much money she’ll earn from the sale*. This same behavior is evident in almost any situation in which meeting one person’s needs translates into another’s income. Human services employees don’t make commissions or bonuses the way many salespeople do. Most are probably overworked and underpaid. Nevertheless, their jobs *are* dependent on having a stable of “needy” individuals with disabilities to serve.

It’s important for people who use services to see this side of things—to understand their “value” as an income-generating commodity to some agencies. Thus, it’s also critically important for them to be thoughtful about their use of services. It’s also important for agencies to confront the Big (Disability) Business aspect of service provision. This is probably not a hot topic around the water cooler. If I were employed by a human service agency, it would be disconcerting to admit that keeping people dependent on me—in a very personal, day-to-day manner—is what maintains my job security.

This country spends billions of dollars on behalf of people with disabilities and their families. Most of the money, however, pays for staff salaries and administrative costs. Little—if any—is actually entrusted directly to individuals with disabilities or their families. If it was, they could purchase the services they need on the open market.

Let’s go back to Monica for a moment, and assume she’s paid \$3.00/hour (yes, paying her

sub-minimum wages is legal), the job coach is paid \$15.00/hour, and the agency receives about \$10.00/hour (a low estimate) for administrative costs, making a total of \$28.00/hour. If Monica works 20 hours a week, she’s generating \$560.00/week in income, or \$29,120.00/year! What if the government cut out the “middle” and simply paid Monica that amount? Since she wouldn’t need the few hundred dollars per month in SSI (Supplemental Security Income) or Medicaid (she could buy her own insurance policy), all *that* money could be put back in the Federal treasury! This will never happen, of course. But it can prod us to rethink the goofiness of Big (Disability) Business.

Changes *can* be made. Agencies can help people with disabilities learn *to help themselves*, instead of doing so much for them. They can help people learn how to find what they need from the natural supports and generic services in their communities, and help them learn how to get connected to their communities, so they can become interdependent citizens instead of dependent clients.

When and if this happens, the need for human service workers *will* shrink, and some agency staffers *will* lose their jobs.

But what if those staffers found new jobs at ordinary businesses? Joan could take her expertise to the human resources department of a big company and ensure the company recruited, hired, and supported employees with disabilities. Tom could go to work for the library and make sure it was accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities. Teresa could leave the segregated special ed preschool and open her own daycare/preschool and ensure it includes young children with disabilities. Keep imagining—the possibilities are unlimited!

**Don’t make
other people
dependent on you.**

Ed Roberts