The Role of Occupational Therapy in Facilitating Employment of Individuals With Developmental Disabilities

What Are Developmental Disabilities?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines developmental disabilities as severe, lifelong disabilities that are attributable to a mental and/or physical impairment, manifested before age 22 years, and likely to continue indefinitely. These impairments result in substantial functional limitations in three or more areas of major life activity (Administration on Developmental Disabilities, 2009).

In the United States, more than 40% of individuals with disabilities who are capable of working with accommodations are unemployed, in spite of legislative requirements for reasonable accommodations (Dick & Golshani, 2008). Occupational therapy practitioners can facilitate work opportunities in varied settings such as individual competitive work, supported employment at sheltered workshops, enclaves, mobile work crews, and transitional employment for these individuals. With an appropriate job match, those with developmental disabilities can flourish in the open job market or explore supported work options.

The Role of OT in Facilitating Work Skills

Occupational therapy practitioners assess demands of the workplace and evaluate an individual's abilities as well as barriers to task completion specific to a setting. Many occupational therapists are trained to optimize worker performance and minimize the risk of repetitive strain injury by fitting jobs to workers. For a successful job match, an occupational therapist trained in ergonomics can evaluate the following three primary components of the job(s) in question:

- Physical Demands: Refers to postural/positional requirements (i.e., standing, squatting); external force requirements (i.e., lifting weight, grip and pinch forces); limb and dexterity requirements; physiological requirements; duration of the work shift; and amount of time that activities are performed.
- Cognitive Demands: Includes such components of thinking as memory, ability to learn, problem solving capabilities, and intuitive thought processes.
- Behavioral/Emotional Demands: Refers to the accepted social processes and interactions that are required to perform the job duties, and includes emotional regulation, communication, monitoring safety of self and/or others, initiative (the ability to self-start), and management of others.

Providing Supports in the Workplace

As persons with developmental disabilities explore their work options, occupational therapy practitioners assist by completing prevocational or vocational assessments, job analyses, and functional capacity evaluations. To be successful, the individual is matched to a job classification for which he or she has the physical, cognitive, and behavioral/emotional capability to perform across all demand levels. In addition, adaptive equipment or techniques can be used with many job functions to accommodate performance by someone with a disability. To prepare high school students for employment, occupational therapy practitioners may work as part of a multidisciplinary team within school work-study programs or community-based programs.

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The following are some of the ways in which occupational therapy practitioners may facilitate employment:

- Evaluate and address sensory, motor, and perceptual abilities of the person as part of a prevocational/vocational needs assessment, or ongoing support for a work-study program.
- Evaluate the work site to examine the sensory, motor, and perceptual requirements of specific work tasks, along with environmental factors such as noise, clutter, and the distance to the closest bathroom.
- Match the client's abilities with specific job requirements, then fabricate needed supports (e.g., wider handles for gripping tools, noise-reducing headphones, a nonslip surface).
- Determine accessibility and safety of work area and recommend adaptive equipment.
- Do a task analysis of job requirements and outline the components into a sequence. A written script ensures that multiple helpers (e.g., job coaches, therapists, special educators) all follow the same sequence.
- Create programs for skill development needed for job completion (e.g., improving standing tolerance and finger dexterity).
- Develop and implement programs and adaptations for independence in activities such as toileting, grooming, and eating meals in a socially appropriate manner.
- Recommend access options for communication systems or a communication device, possibly in collaboration with the speech-language pathologist.
- Explore job possibilities not previously discerned by the employer or work-study coordinator.

Occupational therapy practitioners can also assist individuals with developmental disabilities to transition to retirement communities and new jobs if desired; and with maintaining health, wellness, and social participation as they age.

Conclusion

Occupational therapy practitioners can assist individuals with developmental disabilities to successfully engage in work tasks and satisfactorily participate in meaningful work roles across the lifespan.

References

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