Background
Individuals who use AAC report that employment provides both strong feelings of self-worth from contributing to society, and the income to act on important personal decisions (McNaughton, Light, & Arnold, 2002; McNaughton, Symons, Light, & Parsons, 2006; Odom & Upthegrove, 1997). We also know, however, that individuals who use AAC experience the lowest level of employment of any major disability group (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garcia, & Levine, 2005).

Recent survey and focus group research has contributed to our understanding of the job-seeking activities of individuals who use AAC, and the supports needed for positive employment outcomes (Bryen, Potts, & Carey, 2007; McNaughton, Light & Gulla, 2003). Individuals with a broad range of disabilities, and of different ages and educational levels, use AAC to participate in a wide range of employment activities (McNaughton & Bryen, 2002). Common to the success of many of these individuals, however has been ongoing attention to three areas: (a) promoting positive attitudes for achieving employment goals; (b) developing individual assets to support employment; and (c) obtaining access to employment opportunities.

Promoting Positive Attitudes Prior to Employment
Attitudes influence behavior – if the individual who uses AAC and significant others believe that employment is a realistic goal, then day-to-day planning and educational programming for that individual will reflect that belief. Many of the individuals who are employed and who use AAC have described their personal commitment to obtaining employment, and that this goal helped to direct the planning of academic coursework and other employment related activities, such as having a part-time job, while in school (McNaughton et al., 2002).

Developing positive attitudes among the members of the "employment team" – the support givers, teachers and transition support personnel who will need to contribute to employment success – is also of critical importance. To build and maintain positive attitudes about future employment, attention should be given to two areas: first, developing a greater awareness of how individuals who use AAC can participate in the workplace, and second, helping the individual to develop a strong work ethic.

Models of work-force participation. Because there are so few individuals with severe disabilities in the workplace, many individuals who use AAC, as well as their parents and teachers, do not consider employment to be a possibility. But there are increasing numbers of individual who use AAC who are employed in traditional job-settings (McNaughton et al., 2002), or who are self-employed (McNaughton et al., 2006). Familiarity with success stories, as well as an understanding of frequently encountered challenges and needed supports, can help in supporting motivation and the setting of achievable goals.

Work ethic. Employers frequently describe the importance of a *strong work ethic*, the employee's commitment to the completion of an activity at a high level of quality, as critical to employment success (McNaughton et al., 2003). Some adults who use AAC and are employed have reported that they were sometimes in their first job before they got honest feedback on their performance – as children and young adults, they had little experience with completing a task independently, and with receiving corrective feedback. The development of a strong sense of self-efficacy can be supported from an

early age through opportunities to make decisions and make meaningful contributions in the home, school, and community (Carlson, 1994).

Developing Individual Assets

Successful employment requires the combined effort of employers and other support personnel, so to talk of "developing assets" is not to imply that the individual who uses AAC must undertake the full responsibility of preparing for the workplace. Building awareness about the ability of individuals with disabilities to contribute to the community, and giving careful attention to needed community and workplace resources (e.g., transportation, personal care attendants), are also important.

At the same time, many individuals who use AAC and who are employed share important skills that support employment success. Competent use of an AAC system, experience and skill in a targeted employment area, and the knowledge of the social skills needed in the workplace will all be important to pursuing employment following graduation.

Use of AAC system. Both individuals who use AAC and their employers (McNaughton et al., 2003) speak strongly of the importance of effective and efficient use AAC systems in the workplace. In addition to the AAC system itself, the employee will need to be able to effectively access the increasing range of technology common in today's workplace (McNaughton & Bryen, 2002).

Skills desired in work-place. In order to obtain and maintain employment, there needs to be a good match between employee skills and employer needs. Common workplace activities for individuals with strong literacy skills include computer programming, professional writing, public speaking, and providing technical support for AAC manufacturers (Light, Stoltz, & McNaughton, 1996). The employers of these individuals talk of the importance of identifying appropriate "low-input, high output" jobs, in which relatively small amount of text input results in a highly valued product (McNaughton et al., 2003).

Social skills. Social skills play an important role in maintaining long term employment success. Recent research provides clear evidence that individuals who use AAC will be expected to demonstrate appropriate knowledge of workplace social skills – the knowledge of how to interact with co-workers and supervisors (McNaughton et al., 2003).

Obtaining Access to Employment Opportunities

Success in finding employment is dependent both upon having needed job skills as well a strong job contact network. The most successful employment outcomes are those in which the individual who uses AAC can identify an employer with an interest in his/her job skills and who is committed to the development of a diverse employee workforce. Development and maintenance of a strong social network can assist in the search for a good job match (Carey, Potts, Bryen, & Shankar, 2004).

Summary

Careful consideration of employment "success stories" can provide important guidance to development of employment and transition planning for individuals who use AAC. This session will summarize recent research on the experiences of individuals who use AAC in a wide variety of employment settings, including full time-employment, self-

employment, micro-enterprises, and tele-work, as well as the view of employers and co-workers. Case vignettes will be used to illustrate key factors contributing to positive employment outcomes for individuals who use AAC.

Note

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