

APSE Conversations: David King and Kate Travis Talking Employment

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Julie Christensen

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Kari Tietjen

Welcome to another APSE podcast. My name is Kari Tietjen. I am the certification director with national APSE. And I'm joined in conversation today with two CESP, certified employment support professionals, who are credentialed and working in the field of employment supports in two different places in the country. So I'm here in Iowa, and I'm the current Iowa APSE President as well. So I get to work with providers here.

I'm joined in conversation by Kate Travis and David King, I'd asked you both to go ahead and introduce yourselves and share you know how your involvement with APSE started. And a little bit about what you do in your day job. Kate, you want to kick us off?

Kate Travis

Absolutely nice to talk to you guys today. So my name is Kate Travis. I'm the assistant services director at Ability Beyond which is a large nonprofit headquartered in both Connecticut and New York serving up close to 4000 individuals a year. My work is focused, obviously around employment services. And I oversee all of our Connecticut programs that help people with finding competitive employment out in their communities. So we serve in those programs a little over 1000 individuals a year through our work with individual placement and support model, Customized Employment VR services, we operate a national Ticket to Work program, and do a lot of things related to employment. I have been involved with APSE for a very long time and have been co president of the Connecticut chapter since I believe 2015. So the world of employment is near and dear to my heart since I actually began in the field as an employment specialist almost 19 years ago.

Kari Tietjen

That's great. Thanks, Kate, for introducing yourself. David, would you like to introduce yourself?

David King

Alright, thanks, Kari. My name is David King. I'm the Director of Career Services at ARC industries in Columbus, Ohio. I've been with ARC industries for the last two years previously, I was with goodwill Columbus for 27 years. So what my department does right now I oversee our job coaches, job developers, that are working with people with developmental disabilities, finding them the jobs in the community there. So we have a unique relationship with our county board in that we used to be the employment division for the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities back then back at the beginning of 2019. We privatized services just with some of the direction that the field was going in there and became our own non for profit. But we still have that unique relationship with the county board. So high percentage of the individuals that we worked with are individuals with that are labeled that supported employment individuals with the higher need. So the use of that CESP is really instrumental in the training and the work that our individuals do, what the customers that we serve. So my connection with APSE has been I started I think my first apps the conference back in 2014. fell in love with the mission of APSE and the direction it was going. That was the first year that I actually stepped from day service programming into our workforce development at Goodwill at that time there. So really learned a lot through that first conference, and really gave me a mission for the individuals that we served. And making sure that we became part of that movement to really create those pathways to career employment for the individuals that we serve. So really a passion of ours in our industries to make sure that we we help them take their next steps towards competitive employment. So I appreciate the chance to be part of this conversation today.

Kari Tietjen

Awesome. Welcome both. Kate and David, I didn't realize your long history. And I say that nicely because you are so important to this field, the managers and directors of employment services and supports that can help guide where the field is headed, and hopefully move the needle forward for employment with people with disabilities. So thank you for sharing that. And David, I hear you loud and clear with jumping on board with the APSE mission, I know that you've done a lot of work over the last few years during the 2020 and 2021. Now covid, 19 pandemic, to change what services look like, do you mind sharing a little bit of your history over the last year and a half what's happened ARC industries?

David King

Sure. So with us being more of a newer company, per se, when I once we privatized their Arc was really on a very aggressive strategic plan, looking at the whole process of really moving the 700 plus individuals that we were currently serving at that time and our facility based programs out into more community based services there. So what was a three year plan, when COVID hit turned really quick into a three month plan. As all facility-based services, those large congregate settings were shut down as a result of COVID. And then all the providers here in Ohio, were scrambling on how do we get people back into service? How do we re engage with people so that we don't lose people, you know, through this process there. So as a result of that, it was it was kind of a few things kind of fell into place. And we took advantage of some of those services. So Arc had a contract through our Franklin County Board. And with Ohio State University, their behavior division, which is called nice longer, that they had done for several

years before I came on to Arc, which was called the peace project. And during that peace project, it was really centered towards individuals that were in our workshops at that time there to give them some experiences out in competitive employment work on some of those soft skills. And this was a three month Summer Program. Prior to COVID, my first year with Arc, we sat down with OSU and they really wanted to expand this to more of a school year program there. So to run from October through March and April, they're really incorporate the students that were in the programs and in the classes that were more geared towards assessment and job coaching and things like that, to connect them with the individuals that we're serving. So to give us all those resources that OSU nice longer had. So when COVID hit, they were thinking about just canceling the contract for the year to figure out where COVID hit, we didn't want we didn't want to lose the contract, because we knew of the benefits that it brought to the individuals that we serve there. So after several long conversations, we came up with what we call the peace project model pod that we were working with there. So we took the group of individuals that were at one time and our de services workshops, and then we created a pod per se, for these individuals where a week of services looked like a combination of two to three days that we had set up in soft skills training, where they we had the advantage of the curriculum that OSU Nisonger had, we combine that with the curriculum that we were used in several of our services, as well, that really ranged over 30 to 40, different soft skills topics, all those topics that you really need to understand no matter what your level of learning is, to be successful and to appointment. So we had two to three days of soft skills training that we provided. And then we added to that two to three days of actually competitive, we paid internships that we provided out and with, we connected with employers in the community so that we had a chance to take them out in the community where they can practice those soft skills. This was pretty successful for us there and that the six individuals that were in this initial model of those we had one that dropped out midway due to COVID concerns, we had two of those that went on into job development after they finished this project. And then the other three individuals went on into our group employment services, which was the next step for them so that they can work on on other things that they needed to help them get toward move towards competitive employment. Since we were very successful with this model, we decided to Okay, all of our vocab services at that time that we were trying to re engage and get people back into services. We decided to form these vocab groups around what this model was since we saw some success under there so we moved the vocab service Under my career services department sense, my staff were the ones that were experienced in competitive employment and that whole employment realm there. So they understood what it took to on what those steps should be and understood, you know, the things that they need to work on and the type of goals that we needed to really focus on to help these guys take that next step. So we took that model, and we really revamped it, we changed, we tweaked it a little bit with the new services, and that we made all of our services community based. So the soft skills we moved from the facility out into the community. So those two to three days that we were doing soft skills. Now we're at community centers, and libraries and churches out in the community, we were starting to add on the piece of doing informational interviews, or employment site tours. So we were connecting with different employers in our community just to give the experiences for the individuals that we served. And now I've connected with several employers out as well for that competitive employment piece that we're paying the minimum wage, as well. As part

of this program, another great aspect of the program is that we don't want them to get stuck in the services. So we have this it's a time limited service. So that we have different intervals throughout the process that we are looking at where they're at on the goals, so that we make sure that we are moving them towards their next step. And they don't just get lost in the service there for years on end. So we're seeing some great success. We just had a conversation with OSU last week, again, they are looking at doing the original version of the peace project. So we are going to add overlay that on top of these groups that we're currently doing, or vocab groups to add extra added resources with us, we're going to be able to add a day on campus at OSU where they are going to provide the soft skills training that day for all of our groups there plus a day of just exploration on the campus of the different divisions that they have. We've got the support of their curriculum, we've got the support, they're going to help us set up extra employment sites, as well. So we can actually truly give them a variety of employment sites with that as well. So I mean, we're moving in the right direction. If I'll stop talking to like a talk a little we can talk about funding and things like that, if we want to down the road there and loud, we how do we make something like this work in today's funding environment that we're looking at?

Kari Tietjen

Yeah, thanks for sharing. I know when we spoke last 2020 was a real wild ride. And Ohio, you said the three year plan to three months and to see some success coming from community based employment and the importance you said, of using those staff members that are trained and working with employers working with individuals to assess and figure out what skills they have to bring to the workplace. Kate, how did how did things fare for you all what changes were made? You know, I know it's a time of constant change. But what were some of the things that you're seeing in your realm of employment services?

Kate Travis

Well, it certainly has been a wild ride. That's for sure. We were really lucky as you that we have embraced technology for as long as I've been employed Ability Beyond. So we were able to make some quick pivots to doing some things virtually in order to keep engaging with the individuals we support and provide services as creatively as possible. Obviously, a large number of individuals we support were essential workers. So we also had our team out there providing supports throughout the entire time. And then our teams were fully back to the community in June of last year. So while we still will do remote services, and provide services virtually, we do find that our best work is done out in the community, engaging with the individuals we support as well as all those business partners that we have out there. You know, I think one of our biggest challenges has been some of the turnover that we have seen with our team of employment specialists. I think we all recognize that turnover in this field has been an issue for years and years and years. And you know, personally, it's why I believe we we really do struggle with moving the needle on employment for individuals with disabilities because it is such a specialized skill and position in order to help change the world we're living in. And then we had COVID come and while you know our folks were employed the entire time it did give people pause and they pursued all these other opportunities that we are now seeing available and I can't blame people for taking opportunities. Because we do also know that the rate of pay for

those of us in this field does not equate to the amount of skill and work and effort, unfortunately, based on a lot of those reimbursement rates that we received from our funders. So I would say without a, without a doubt that that turnover that we have experienced has been our biggest pain point. And, you know, we are still actively recruiting. We also in addition to some turnover, we're able to expand services throughout COVID, as an agency that was able to kind of pivot and be nimble and expand to some new regions where, you know, some help was needed. Having to now recruit additional team members for that growth has been, has been interesting. But one of the things that I absolutely incorporate while interviewing is sharing about our career path that we have built for employment specialists. And the fact that we, you know, incorporate a professional designation in the field as people learn and grow in the role. And that Ability Beyond will pay for people to sit and get their professional designation in the field after they're with us two years so that they can demonstrate that they have gained that professional knowledge and skill.

Kari Tietjen

Yeah, thanks for sharing some of the issues around hiring. I know here in Iowa, and I mean, all over I host, the CESP conversations to invite CESP, who are currently certified every other week, we usually get around 80 ish people attending those, which is really cool. And a lot of them are Ohio based, since Ohio has the most currently certified individuals and it kind of goes by state, but everywhere sharing that's the biggest issue is how do we find more professional staff that can work in employment services, because you both mentioned, it's not an easy job requires a lot of training to get someone comfortable with it. I remember my own training process, and it felt like it was a solid year before I really had my feet under myself to get traction. So absolutely, those are big pain points all over, Kate.

Kate Travis

I don't know if that makes me feel better about it. But I think that more of us can lend our voices to bringing attention to it. And as well as the importance of the work being done. It's super important.

David King

Just to go off of that a little bit, Kate, I think that's as a result of that, with us having the challenge of finding qualified individuals out there, and where we're at on our pay scales with individuals in this field there versus other employers out there that are competitors, you know, for qualified individuals there, I think we I had to really change my thought process as I'm hiring individuals for this there. Because I'm getting a lot of individuals through my postings I have that have really no experience in employment services. So it's really had turned to Okay, I have to be okay with that. Which means then it goes back to I've got to have a real good training to give people that real core base of where we're going. So they understand that piece. Because there's, I get a lot of people from day service programs that have the heart, there's just don't have that understanding, because they've been in that system for so long there. So I think this is where CESP is really important. And where it gives us some of those resources. And some of the foundations of what we really need to make sure are the essential points of those trainings that we put in place for these individuals as we're bringing them in, because we're seeing so

many individuals without that experience, so we've got to get them trained, which is good. I mean, it causes us some pressure, because then you've got that year, time of experience, we got to get in the door. So it's balancing those ones on our team that still have the CESP to be able to serve those individuals that you need that cesp for versus the other ones you're trying to get the training for there.

Kate Travis

Yeah, like Kari said, it certainly does take at least a year I think for new employment specialists to feel like their feet are under them firmly and they are able to fully navigate this world we live in, especially at Ability Beyond our, you know, our VR system has so many nuance services and different things that we do. And you know, there's everything from authorizations to the communication to just, it's so much to learn. Yeah. And I do think you're right to it. You know, we're looking for such a magical combination of traits for people to be successful in this field. And sometimes that's not a person with experience. Those are like finding a unicorn sometimes. But that personality that's able to go out and job develop and be the face of your agency while interacting with businesses plus is able to teach and train and, and, you know, be creative. And it's just so much and in a role it is.

Kari Tietjen

It is. Yeah, I think you both have hit on some of the pain points, but also things that you're doing to address that with training for individuals. But certainly, that wage gap is one of the biggest pieces that I think APSE members certainly need to rally behind is how can we get better funding to recognize these services at the rate in which they should be reimbursed at that wage? What is it called wage compression, where people served, you know, people with disabilities are even finding jobs that have wage that's higher than the direct support or employment support professional? Like you said, Kate, I don't blame people at all. That's a failure of the system. Yeah. Absolutely. So what has worked over the last few years to retain people.

Kate Travis

So our career pathing process just so you guys have the vision of it. After a year with us, we will have folks go through and get their anchor certification. On top of, you know, let me back up once they start with us, we have them go through trainings of college of employment support, get some foundational knowledge on the field, do a lot of shadowing Learn, learn the nuances of the role in our agency, once they're with us, for they, for a year, we offer them the opportunity to take that course through VCU, get their acre certification, as well as do a four day workweek if they're interested. And then at two years in the role, that's when we will offer for them to sit and get their professional designation in the field through the CESP, at which point they become a senior employment specialist with our agency. And we have tied some dollar incentives to those two pieces as well proving that as you're with us longer and gain the skills and you know, hit those benchmarks. There's a raise associated with with doing that.

David King

So and we're just on the surface of really figuring out what that accountability, those metrics look like for us there. So we've just instituted a new word, 70% billable time that they that all of our individuals have to hit? We're looking at on the positive into that once we get that as a team hit that then what are those incentives that we can offer? On top of that, if we're bringing in 75-80%? You know, are there money monetary incentives that maybe we can put in there in the form of bonuses. But I think as we're trying to figure all that, I think the biggest thing that we're trying to do, as well as that we're also kind of playing around with bringing in part time versus full time individuals into this role there. We've talked, I've talked to several providers of the services here in Franklin County, and some of them are going to that part time role. My concern, my question I threw out to them was then where is your where do you recruit for individuals there is that is that something that's consistent when you hire people in part time, and they said they've had no problems their recruiting areas is with your college kids. And with retired individuals, they're, that that's what they're looking for. And so they have a passion, they, they, you know, the college kids, you know, you'll only get them for a certain period of time there. But you're going to have good employees, you know, for that time you have them retired individuals, you're going to have them indefinitely, because that's what they're looking for something to make them feel good that they're giving back to the people that we're serving type of thing there. So we're dabbling, we're starting to look that direction and hire and part time, I still think the key number one thing is it's that culture, you know, with the individuals we're bringing in, we talked about that with the employers, when we're trying to, to network with employers and finding those employers with the right culture. It's the individuals that we're bringing into, they've got to understand the culture that we're doing, they have to have the right mindset. And we've got some long term individuals that have been with our department for years on end. And it's not about the money for them. Obviously, the money helps, because that's why we work to pay our bills. But for them, it truly is they've got a heart for the individuals, they understand what the need is, and they've got a passion. And we sat down as a team when I first came in here to kind of lay out what's our mission as a team. And we all agree it's about helping people take their next steps toward employment. It's about finding competitive not just jobs, but careers in the community. And if I can get staff in here that understand that piece, and that's the reason they're in here. I'm gonna see longevity through that, of course, we're gonna see turnover, you know, and but if I'm doing my job, right, as a manager, that's part of my role then is to help people to hit not only the individuals we're serving, but our staff as well, to really help them take their next step towards the their career pathway as well. So I know there's gonna be some of that turnover, but it's about finding that right culture, the right individuals, making sure you're bringing in the right individuals getting that right training, and then working with the systems that we currently have to really look at the pay so that we can attract more individuals in there for people that really need it to support their families, you know, if to get those some of those that side as well to give us more applicants to work towards that?

Kate Travis

Yeah, agreed. And I think, you know, what I love about the CESP so much is the fact that it also allows us as a field to show that this is a professional role in the hopes that it allows us to recruit individuals who are looking to make that career path more sometimes I laugh about the

fact that, you know, for those of us in the field, if you try to tell someone, you're an employment specialist, most people are going to stare at you and be like, what's that job, it's like the best kept secret in the world, because it really is this amazing career where you get to, you know, directly see the results of your work, and that you are helping people to achieve a better life through the job you're doing, you're certainly not stuck behind a desk, you are out there in the community forming all these relationships with both the individuals we support and then all our business partners. You know, so it shouldn't be such a secret, professional career, you know, and the world needs to know about this job. Absolutely.

Kari Tietjen

Yeah, I've heard about some agencies having some great success, David, like you were mentioning to recruiting from college students, people who are in psychology backgrounds, or, you know, certain major. Education, business majors to really get a feel for the business field and what the labor force looks like to you know, and just a great opportunity. I know if I would have known about it in college, I would have signed up right away, because it would have been a fulfilling job, certainly more... not to knock this job. But I was a bridal consultant at Bed Bath and Beyond, which allowed me to use some counseling skills in a different way. To find these people that do want to work nights, weekends, in addition to the full time 40 hour a week job, I think that will be really interesting to see where the field heads with that. And considering those part time people, David, you brought up some good points to consider, you know, how are we continuing to train them it you know, how many hours a week does someone need to be working to have a solid understanding of situations that come up in this employment field, because if you are only supporting one individual, at one job a week, that does not give you the breadth of experience that you need to have to be successful, more widely in this role.

David King

I want to just add this piece to part of our role, when we really looked at our job description here for this role, our employment support professional so we've made it an all inclusive position there. So we went from just being job developers and job coaches, that my staff are trained in all services that we provide in career services that makes us more flexible as a department. You know, with the different training programs, we have on top of just the traditional job coaching job development roles that our staff can be moved from area to area as needed to cover and it gives them more of an understanding of the different needs of the individuals we're serving, as well. Part of that job description, I mean, it's with our staff are required to get the seat either have the cesp or obtain the cesp. Once you have that year of certified services under your belt of experience. So that is a requirement in our job description, which adds an extra dollar an hour on top of the pay that we will bring in for someone that does have that CESP. So trying to leverage the CESP to make this a more professional level position as well.

Kate Travis

That's always so interesting to me to hear how agencies have structured the role. Well, we're similar to you, David, and that our employment specialists do every facet of the work from intake, to job development to job coaching to discharge although we do also have some job

coaches on staff for those individuals who require more intensive ongoing support, you know, after they've been stabilized at their new job. Connecticut does not yet offer any kind of funding differential for staff that have gone on to get their CESP. So I do hope to see that one day that recognition of the agencies that are are moving forward with that and can demonstrate That are our team members have that level of core competencies. But we have incorporated similar, similarly to you, in our assistant managers in our management over our employment programs in requiring that CESP as a part of the job description.

Kari Tietjen

That's an important difference, I think, between different states is what is required. You know, in some states, there are no requirements for an employment support professional looking to do job coaching, job development, where in others that is a requirement either to earn your CESP go through a specific training, like an anchor training or state specific one. And that really does impact the level at which providers can use that to support their own professional development of their staff members. Because you, you both talked about looking at diverse applicants, thinking about the breadth of experience that people are coming from, if someone is required to have a CESP to provide services, how can we build a career ladder, so that they can be working as they're earning time toward the eligibility, so they can even sit for their CESP after nine months to a year. And you both mentioned to job descriptions, and the importance of advertising the role in a professional way and, and changing the way that you're recruiting to, I find that interesting to hear how different agencies are looking for new staff members, training them, and then hopefully keeping them and when they don't, they're moving on to bigger and better things. And then they can go on and tell people, hey, I worked in this great job. Did you know this exists, that's something that I find a lot with people I used to work with, as an employment support professional, as we've all kind of moved on into different areas. But that thread still continues. And we built really strong bonds. So we're all involved in Iowa apps in different ways are still connecting to the field of employment and disability and supporting it. So. Well, thank you both for being here. I think it's so great to talk with providers in the field and with two leaders like yourselves. I've had great conversations with you both about CESP throughout the years. So it made sense to just bring some more people together and have a conversation. All right. Well, thanks, David and Kate for being here. Really appreciate the conversation. And hopefully folks can learn a little something about the CESP credential, how agencies are using it. And some of the issues that you're running up against to to continue to be creative in providing employment supports that, like we said, move the needle forward on disability employment. So thank you both for being here. And for those listening, please do make sure you subscribe to the podcast rate and review because that's how more people find it. And we need to keep having these discussions. So share it out. Thanks, Kate. Thanks, David.

David King

Thanks, Kari. Good to meet you Kate.

Kate Travis

Good to meet you, David.

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