Final Report of A Study of Best Practices in the Home-Based Employment of People with Disabilities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

This report describes the findings of a Manitoba study that examined the opportunities, challenges and risks that persons with disabilities may experience when they do paid employment at home. The study focused on workers who were paid employees rather than self-employed persons or operators of home-based businesses. It included persons who work at home all the time, as well as workers who split their time between their homes and a traditional workplace. It did not include people whose only work at home was paid or unpaid overtime work done in the evening or on weekends after working a full day or week at their employer's workplace.

The main findings of the study are based on the first hand experiences of 21 people with disabilities who worked at home. They completed a questionnaire and attended a focus group meeting or interview. Eleven also recorded daily diaries about working at home for two weeks. Most of them also attended a workshop where the preliminary findings were presented and discussed.

For background information, the study also reviewed previous research and conducted focus group meetings with disability agencies, employers, unions and supervisors of people with disabilities who work at home.

Key Findings

Reasons for Working at Home

Most of the study participants worked at home for reasons related to their disabilities, including:

- flexibility to work when they felt most productive and rest when necessary
- because their employers' workplaces were physically inaccessible or lacked assistive technology they required
- better access to attendant care or pain management strategies that were unavailable or difficult to arrange at their employers' workplaces
- to avoid extreme weather conditions that exacerbated pain related to their disabilities or created risks of falling on slippery winter surfaces
- because previous employers had not accommodated them satisfactorily when they disclosed their disabilities and/or requested accommodation

Additional Benefits of Working at Home

In addition to the reasons they worked at home, the study participants identified a host of additional benefits and advantages of working at home, including:

- freedom from distractions and office politics
- less stressful
- reduced time spent traveling to and from work
- save money on lunches and work clothing
- flexibility to care for sick family members
- flexibility to attend to non-work activities (e.g. going to bank, doctor)
- flexibility to work when disability would make it difficult to go to employer's workplace

In contrast to the reasons they worked at home-which were usually related to disability-many of the additional benefits they reported are similar to those reported by persons without disabilities who work at home.

Challenges of Working at Home

Although most participants were relatively satisfied working at home, they identified a lengthy list of challenges they had encountered.

Setting Up the Arrangement

Some participants reported that they experienced resistance from their employers when they requested to do some or all of their work from home. Some were reluctant to ask their employers to provide or pay for equipment or services required to work from home. Some felt that persons with disabilities who are unemployed or receiving income assistance may not have the confidence and self-esteem required to request and negotiate a home-based work arrangement.

Isolation

Some participants reported that they sometimes experienced feelings of isolation working at home. In general, however, relatively few participants indicated that they experienced major feelings of isolation. More reported that they enjoyed the solitude of working at home. The fact that many of the participants did not work exclusively at home may minimize their risk of isolation.

Co-workers

Some participants indicated that they felt well-supported by their co-workers, but others reported that some of their co-workers resented their ability to work at home.

Communication

Participants indicated that they had less access to informal communications than they would have if they worked in the same location as their co-workers. They also said that they were

sometimes inadvertently excluded from work-related communications, such as postponement of meetings that they only learned about after traveling to the meeting site.

Meetings

Most participants reported that they physically attended meetings at their employer's workplace. Others indicated that they participated in meetings by telephone. Interestingly, however, some home-based workers who experienced difficulty traveling to attend meetings had not considered conference calls as a solution.

Career Development and Advancement

Study participants did not say much about the impact working at home had on their career development and advancement opportunities. Approximately half of the participants worked for small non-profit organizations that often have limited budgets for professional development. Some had only recently started their jobs and hadn't begun to consider career development and advancement opportunities within their organization. More than half of the participants were over 45 years of age, and some of the older participants indicated that they did not foresee further career advancement opportunities.

Maintaining Healthy Boundaries

Many of the study participants identified the flexibility to work outside standard hours as a benefit of working at home, but some people who worked flexible hours described significant challenges maintaining the boundaries between their work and family/personal lives. In most cases, persons who discussed this challenge talked about difficulties keeping their work life from intruding on their non-work lives, rather than situations where their family and other non-work responsibilities intruded on their work.

Technology and Telecommunications

All of the study participants used a telephone to do their work. Most also used computers, faxes, e-mail, and the Internet. Most participants did their work without assistive technology, but some participants used specialized keyboards, voice recognition software, screen reader software and hardware, large monitors, Braillers, scanners and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software.

Most participants indicated that their employers provided or reimbursed them for work-related supplies and long distance telephone charges, but most employers did not provide computers, printers or fax machines. Most participants paid for their own equipment from their own pockets. Most of the minority of participants who indicated that their employers supplied computer hardware, software or assistive technology worked for large organizations.

Most employers also did not provide separate telephone lines for work-related calls, faxes, and Internet usage. Most participants used their residential phone for work. As a result, some indicated that they sometimes missed personal calls or faced challenges avoiding work-related communications outside of their usual work hours.

Technical Support

Only a few participants reported that their employers provided technical support for the equipment they used to work at home. These tended to be persons working for large organizations with Information Technology specialists. Most participants who used computers indicated that they had to solve their own technical problems. A few indicated that they paid external service providers for technical assistance.

Conclusion

Despite this lengthy list of challenges, most of the participants in this study liked working at home. Some who described significant challenges indicated that they would prefer to continue working at home even if their employers were willing to accommodate them in the workplace.

Nevertheless, home-based work is not a broad solution to the employment problems of persons with disabilities in Canada or anywhere else. Working at home may be an effective way of accommodating disability, but it is not a substitute for accommodations in traditional workplaces. Many people with disabilities-just like many people without disabilities-are not interested in working at home.

Persons with disabilities who want to work at home for reasons unrelated to their disabilities should have the same access to those opportunities as persons without disabilities. Additionally, persons with disabilities should also have additional access to home-based telework if they see working at home as an attractive way of accommodating disabilities.

A companion handbook to this report entitled *Best Practices in the Home-Based Employment of People with Disabilities* provides practical advice for workers with disabilities who work or want to work at home. It also offers best practices and other suggestions for employers, unions, policymakers, researchers, organizations of persons with disabilities and agencies that provide job search and other employment supports to persons with disabilities.