Resource Ownership: An Introductory Brief for Customizing Employment

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Introduction

Resource ownership is a mutually beneficial process of acquiring materials, equipment, or skills that, when matched to a job seeker's interests and customer needs, generates profits for the employer and wages for the employee. The average cost of a bachelor's degree from a state-supported college today is approximately $50,000 and that degree is a commonly and culturally accepted symbol of exploitable resources. Employers reason that they can profit from a graduate's intellect so people with degrees get hired and earn substantially more over a lifetime than those without degrees. In essence, the graduate gives the employer that degree, a $50,000 resource, in trade for wages and career growth opportunity. The same occurs when a truck driver who owns a tractor-trailer applies for a hauling job. Without the trucking equipment, the trucker faces unemployment, or a less satisfactory, lower paying hauling job.

People with the most significant disabilities are not often recognized for their exploitable gifts and talents, hence their high unemployment rate. Resource ownership counteracts the effects of disability stigma by suggesting a shared risk between the worker and the employer (and perhaps the funding agency), and a partnering approach to job creation.

Examples

1. John is in his mid-twenties and is labeled with a significant psychiatric disability. His love of dogs led him to grooming classes and state certification paid for by VR. Currently he is taking advanced certification classes and works at the grooming school, with employment specialist support, using two height-adjustable tables he bought to improve and enhance his productivity.

2. Georgia, a single mom with muscular dystrophy and a psychiatric disability, was referred to a local CRP for job development services. She asked for work in an office setting and shortly began work as a part-time clerical assistant. In order to increase her hours and pay, she used a PASS to purchase a new full-featured copier. This machine provided various collating and copying features that increased the complexity of tasks assigned, increased speed, and drove down the cost per copy. Bringing her resource into the company boosted her income by over 25%. She has now been employed by the same company for 15 years, earning full benefits and an employer-matched retirement.

Concerns

Resource Ownership contains the roots of their own destruction. It should be used cautiously, and again, always on behalf of the job seeker. Quality job development strategies must be employed regardless of the situation, and a proper job analysis and match should guide the effort. Critically important too is that in most instances, the equipment being purchased, while profiting the employer, functions as universal technology enabling the new hire to perform the tasks of the job efficaciously.

The typical concerns raised about this and other resource ownership scenarios are important. These are the most common questions:

1. Isn't Resource Ownership the same as buying a job?

Resource Ownership is an investment strategy similar to earning a college degree, learning a trade, or buying a business. Owning resources that generate wealth provides the opportunity for financial exploitation. The exploitation of the resource produces profits which pay wages, creating an employment relationship of mutual need, obligation, and reward. With the unemployment rates of people with disabilities so high, resource ownership uses accepted capitalist processes to open the job market. Using rehabilitation funding to secure jobs is the purpose of these funds in the first place.

2. Who owns the equipment?

Generally any resource ownership situation is guided by a written letter of agreement stating simply the conditions of the relationship. In most cases, the individual retains ownership of the resource, just as an auto mechanic retains ownership of the hand tools she takes to work at her employer's garage. The usable life of the equipment is determined by an accountant or by the company making the equipment and it is recommended that following the useable life of this equipment, that the employer be required to purchase the replacement, or make repairs once the item leaves its original warranty.

Should the employee decide to leave the job, or the employer fires or lays-off the employee, the employee may choose to keep the equipment, offer the employer first opportunity to purchase it, or, in cases where the equipment's title is still held by a funding agency, be returned to that agency for disposal or used in a new job creation scenario.

3. Where does the money to buy the equipment, tools, or training come from?

There are numerous sources for purchasing equipment or specialized training. Generally, the entire job development funding package, including job analysis, development, coaching, et al., requires multiple financial sources. Typically money derives from day program vocational funding through school transition programs and developmental disabilities, mental health, or perhaps specialized Medicaid waivers such as those available for individuals with brain injuries. These funds are amalgamated with other sources, including VR or WIA, or perhaps a Plan for

Achieving Self Support (PASS) from the Social Security Administration (SSA). A common approach is to use Mental Health or Developmental Disability Medicaid funding for job coaching, case management, transportation, and extended employment supports, while tapping VR for job development and equipment purchases, and using WIA One-Stop funding for on-going skills training. A majority of states now allow for person-centered planning and many are using state general funds and Medicaid templates, such as the Independence Plus option, to customize spending, making resource ownership and amalgamated funding a more common practice.

4. What about liability?

Generally, liability is the employer's responsibility, although every agency should check both with their legal counsel and their insurance company. In the letter of agreement governing any resource ownership situation, it should be stated simply that the employer accepts typical liability, as they would with any piece of equipment operated by any employee. Also included should be a statement that asserts the employer's responsibility to insure the equipment in case of theft, fire, or natural disaster. If for some reason the employer cannot guarantee this coverage, which usually represents no additional cost to their existing policy, the employee should consider insuring the item.

5. Who does the training?

As mentioned earlier, the use of the natural worksite trainers (i.e. co-workers, supervisors) is preferred, but not always possible, especially when new and unique equipment is introduced. The best option available may be having the firm making the equipment provide on-site instruction. If this is not available, companies often have instructional videos or other means that an employment specialist, co-workers, and the new employee can review and apply.

6. How is the employee protected against exploitation?

Following the recommended discovery, negotiation, job match, and job analysis processes provide substantial safeguards against the misuse of this tactic. Offering equipment in exchange for a job is not the intent of resource ownership. Quality usage requires that:

A. The individual obviously wishes to perform the job or learn the trade that this technology or training accommodates;
B. The individual operates this resource as a core and essential component of their job;
C. The acquisition of this resource fosters steady employment with growth potential;
D. The resource elevates the status and productivity of the individual;
E. The resource compliments and enhances the employee's contribution to workplace profitability;
F. The employee determines if anyone else can use the resource, for instance on a second shift, or while the employee is performing other valued tasks that build their career potential;
G. The employee earns wages commensurate with others performing similar duties.

7. What happens if the employee quits or gets fired?

As alluded to under concern number two, if the employee leaves the job, the employee can keep the equipment to use in leveraging another job, offer the employer first opportunity to purchase it, or, in cases where the equipment's title is still held by a funding agency, be returned to that agency.

8. Is this approach handled in writing?

Yes, and while a contract is perhaps too formal a document, a mutually signed letter of agreement should be developed.

Conclusion

Resource ownership follows the tradition of career investment deeply ingrained in the psyche of our culture. As stated throughout, using resource ownership tempts the harried job developer to lead with the money, putting the job seeker second. The job seeker's satisfaction must remain the focus of attention, blended through careful negotiation in the marketplace to reveal mutual gain between the employee and the employer. Anything less than the consumer-driven approach wastes taxpayer money, makes the job seeker appear incompetent to the community, and is not customized employment.