

WHEN PRAGMATISM LEADS TO PASSION: ZIA'S JOURNEY TO SUPPORTING PEOPLE TO WORK

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes we become unlikely supporters of an idea. A concept we once dismissed, over time, with new experiences and new information, begins to take on new meaning. And ironically, we sometimes become living examples of ideas and values we once rejected.

"We used to have a "over our dead bodies" perspective about supported employment."
-Zia CEO

This is the story of an organization that in under two years, went from summarily rejecting the idea *supported employment* to becoming a statewide example of how to cultivate real, community jobs for people with disabilities. Through a thoughtful, deliberate process that remained true to its pragmatic, entrepreneurial, conversational culture, Zia Therapy Center ("Zia") has successfully built a community-based, financially viable, employment service that supports people throughout Alamogordo to make a *real* contribution through competitive work.

This paper outlines how they did it.

SOME BACKGROUND



Ever since its inception in 1960, Zia has had an independent, entrepreneurial spirit. It was founded to meet the needs of local kids with developmental disabilities and for the past 50 years has broadened from being a disability organization into a true *community* organization—providing vital services that benefit the *entire* Alamogordo community: public transit and child care. Throughout its history, Zia has used its entrepreneurial enthusiasm and business know-how to develop viable, sustainable, public services that contribute to the community's overall welfare. Zia's approach is as pragmatic as it is philosophical: when it sees a need in the community, it works to help meet it.

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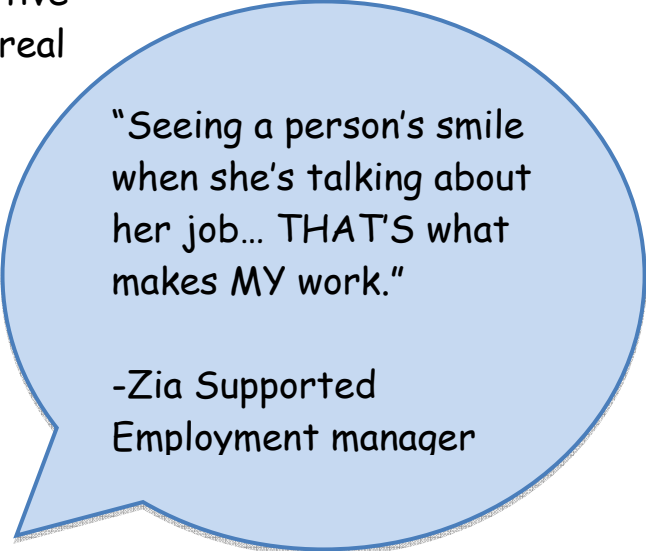
Zia's decision to support competitive employment was as pragmatic as it was philosophical: kids graduating from the local special ed program had an expectation of working competitively.

Zia's employment service also emerged from Zia's pragmatic, entrepreneurial mindset.

After years of dismissing the concept of people with disabilities working competitively, Zia's founder, Barbara, realized that kids coming out of the school system and their families now wanted a different kind of support. They wanted to work in real jobs in their larger community. And once again, Zia began working to meet the emerging community need.

THE OUTCOME:

Today, two years after the realization that triggered the decision to support people with disabilities in competitive employment, Zia supports **seven** people in real work throughout the Alamogordo community. At local restaurants. At the nearby airforce base. At a thrift store. Because of thoughtful conversation, hiring the right people, creating opportunities for learning and leveraging the considerable "social capital" Zia enjoys throughout Alamogordo, Zia has once again remained true to its reputation as an organization that meets the needs of its community. But the effort now goes beyond pragmatism. As Zia's management team witnesses firsthand the impact work has on a person, their passion and commitment grows.



"Seeing a person's smile when she's talking about her job... THAT'S what makes MY work."

-Zia Supported
Employment manager

HOW IT HAPPENED: THE TIMELINE

PRE
May
2007

Organizational long-range plan through 2015

- Discussion of adult services, but not supported employment specifically.
- Incorporated executive director's anticipated retirement in 2010 into the long-range thinking.

May
2007

Short-range implementation meeting to meet long-range plan

- Included expanding supports to facilitate people's "meaningful day" definition.
- Staff with history of supported employment at a different organization assigned to explore viability of supported employment for Zia, acknowledging the state's increased emphasis on supported employment for people with developmental disabilities.

June
2007

CEO and DDSD consultant meet to talk about Zia's progressive transportation initiatives.

- Conversation evolves into discussion about Zia's entrepreneurial culture, micro-businesses, and supported employment concepts.
- Zia staff and DDSD staff/contractors began talking about utilizing Zia's entrepreneurial culture to support people to secure competitive employment.
- Zia staff knew of several people they served who wanted to work.

July-
November
2007

Informal conversations within Zia and between Zia and DDSD about supported employment.

Zia hosts and CEO facilitates a daylong strategic thinking session with Zia leadership to explore viability of becoming supported employment provider.

- Held at mountain retreat, away from Zia offices.
- Invites participation of DDSD.
- CEO facilitates a *compression planning* process, a process on which he is trained and also trains others. This process is a discussion of the pros, cons and next steps of developing employment services.
- Session ends with clear list of follow up questions and additional research needed and the timeline for collecting this information.

December
2007

Zia holds a “decision meeting” where each person who attended the strategic thinking session in December reports back with information.

- Zia decides to move forward and become a supported employment provider.

February
2008

**Spring
2008**

Zia secures its supported employment provider status.

- Zia begins providing supported employment services to five people it already served who were interested in working.
- Zia then puts itself on moratorium until it feels stable and secure in expanding.

**A Big Point:
Summer
2008**

Zia begins providing employment services!

- Assumes support of several individuals who were served by other organizations.

Fall 2008

Zia supports five people in community jobs.

- Works collaboratively with private DVR job developer until they can recruit and hire own.

**Winter
2008/2009**

Zia concerned about financial sustainability

- Recognizes the importance of appropriately allocating manager's expense in organization's budget and divides manager's salary between community access services and supported employment, instead of allocating it all to supported employment.
- Pulls management team together to strategize.
- Decides to host a community luncheon and a Chamber of Commerce breakfast to discuss employment and cultivate job leads.

**Spring
2009**

Zia supports seven people in community jobs...AND the program "breaks even" financially!

- Hires full-time job developer with Bachelor's degree.

**A Big Point:
June 2009**

ZIA MEETS ITS GOAL!

- Over ten people either working or being supported to find work!
- Program now operating with a surplus!

SOME APPROACHES THAT CONTRIBUTED TO ZIA'S SUCCESS



THOUGHTFUL PLANNING

The process remained steady and took nearly two years to accomplish the goal.

Zia utilized a strategic thinking process that ensured honest dialogue, engaged participants and created a clear "to do" list.

They thought about each person as an individual, thinking through the specific interests and circumstances when job developing, engaging others on a person's team.

They met monthly to talk about how things were going and to problem-solve.

They talked about the effort informally all the time—over breakfast, through quick phone calls, etc.

Zia does not “cold call” potential employers but rather uses their vast community network to find the right job for the person.

Zia looks to make the right fit between the person looking for the job and the employer—they usually know both people well and may even arrange informal opportunities for them to meet each other before the informal interview takes place.

Because Zia and its staff are active and well respected in the Alamogordo community, other community members are inclined to trust them and participate in this effort.



THEY
LEVERAGE
THEIR
NETWORKS


While Zia is a large organization, the staff elected to begin the supported employment effort on a small scale.

Some examples of how they did it:

- They began by supporting five people they currently supported who either had jobs or wanted jobs.
- They put themselves on moratorium after beginning services to those five until they determined the effort was viable.
- They didn't hire new staff for the effort until the service could operate "in the black."



THEY
STARTED
SMALL



THEY ENGAGED
SUPPORT FROM
OUTSIDE THE
ORGANIZATION

Zia staff are the force behind the organization's thoughtful, methodical development of a supported employment program. However, they often called on others to help shape the program's structure and direction.

Here are a few examples:

- They solicited the opinions from direct support staff, board members, the local high school and when appropriate, families and case managers.
- They learned from others, participating in conference calls with experienced supported employment providers and sending staff to trainings at the University of North Texas.
- Worked in collaboration with DDSD, to develop effective systems.

Each organization has a unique set of values and *culture* that influence the way it does business. In building a supported employment program, Zia both deliberately and sometimes without knowing it, let its organizational values and culture guide the effort.

Its Pragmatism

If there had not been a demonstrated interest in Alamogordo for supported employment, Zia would not have pursued it.

Also, they rejected potentially controversial practices, like sub-minimum wage contracts, not for philosophical reasons, but for practical ones. As the CEO noted, "it's just too complicated."

Data Drive Decisions

Zia staff typically make decisions based on information, not emotion or bias. There is no ego in holding a viewpoint: if the data conflicts with a perspective, the perspective changes.

A few ways information guided the decision-making process:

- School kids revealed demonstrated demand for employment supports
- An information session with DVR allayed some concerns about employment's impact on public benefits
- Meetings with local employers revealed employment opportunities existed, even in a "bad" economy
- People who are working seem to be happier.

Good Food Always Helps!

Because of its childcare center, Zia has an in-house kitchen and foodstaff. Whenever Zia hosted a supported employment event, its own staff catered!



A FEW OF THE STORIES:

CESAR & LONG JOHN SILVERS

“Whom it may concern,

Cesar Brusuelas has worked for Long John Silvers & AW for about a year and a half now and continues to do a great job. He continues to excel at all tasks given to him. He is always on time and comes in with a great attitude which is a big plus in the restaurant business. He lifts me up sometimes when I'm down and makes me have a better day than I might have had otherwise. Cesar is always wanting to learn and do more than the day before, and is a quick learner. For example we have just installed new computers and register systems and Cesar has already started to understand and operate them.

I know I speak for my management team when I say I hope Cesar is employed here at the restaurant for a long time to come. He is fun to work with and joke around with and has been an asset to our company.”

--letter from Cesar's manager



SEAN & Z-BAY

Much of Zia's initial thinking about supported employment stemmed from an idea for Zia to begin an E-bay business, that would hire several people who used services. The idea then shifted to assisting one person Zia supports, Sean, to own the business. Sean is a quiet man who loves computers but is uncomfortable around people. While Sean and his family weren't comfortable with the idea of *owning* a business, Sean loved the idea of running it. So, true to Zia's entrepreneurial nature, it began "Z-Bay," an internet service that assists community members to sell things online. It is the first of its kind in Alamogordo. Sean runs it out of Zia's administrative office and loves his work. Through his work, Sean has learned new skills like using a digital camera and according to people who have known him a long time, seems "happier, content and more confident."