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National Certification Initiative for Employment Support Professionals: Promoting Quality Integrated Employment Services

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**National Certification Initiative for Employment Support Professionals:
Promoting Quality Integrated Employment Services**

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Abstract

This article describes a recent certification initiative to build an international network of professionals who have the knowledge and skills to provide quality integrated employment services to individuals with a variety of disabilities. An overview of the history and conceptual framework guiding the development of the Employment Support Professional Certification Program will be followed by a presentation of findings from a preliminary survey study of 93 professionals who have been certified. Survey respondents identified both personal and professional motivations for pursuing the Certified Employment Support Professional (CESP) designation, including the desire to (a) achieve a sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction, (b) demonstrate a professional standard of competence and commitment to the profession, and (c) garner professional credibility and enhanced opportunities for career advancement. The authors describe ongoing efforts and recommendations for validating the credentialing program and

for increasing the number of certified professionals equipped to establish and expand equitable employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: certification, Certified Employment Support Professional, disability, employment

**National Certification Initiative for Employment Support Professionals:
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1. Employment Support Professionals Certification Initiative

1.1 Why was the certification developed?

One of the unique features contributing to the success of supported employment is the role of employment support professionals (ESPs) who assist individuals with significant disabilities to obtain and maintain competitive employment in integrated community workplaces (Wehman, Revell, & Brooke, 2003; Parent, Unger, Gibson, & Clements, 1994). Traditionally called *job coaches*, these professionals include employment specialists and consultants, job developers, job placement personnel, and transition specialists and other school-to-work personnel. The diversity of the ESP role is evident by the myriad of skills and knowledge required to fulfill the responsibilities of the position, including interacting within multiple systems (e.g., business, rehabilitation, education); communicating effectively with individuals, family members, and other professionals; conducting person-centered career planning and job development activities; providing on-the-job training and supports; coordinating related services; and insuring long-term, follow-along assistance. In addition, employment support professionals must possess the specific knowledge and facilitation skills necessary to provide supports to transition-age youth and adults across a variety of client populations.

Investment in the employment support workforce has been identified as a key characteristic in providing greater access to integrated employment services (Nord, Luecking, Mank, Kiernan, & Wray, 2013), and effective training and development of ESPs has been empirically shown to lead to better employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities (Butterworth, Migliore, Nord, & Gelb, 2012). Unfortunately, significant variation in the qualifications, training, and experience of employment support professionals across provider agencies within and across states has resulted in major discrepancies in service delivery practices and outcomes. Widespread differences in titles, salaries, job duties, roles within the organization, status, and professional development and career

advancement opportunities also exist across practitioners. The lack of nationally accepted, empirically based competencies to define and establish job requirements for employment support professionals has been a limiting factor in the promotion of increased credibility and professionalism in the field.

According to the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (2012), “a *certification* program is designed to test the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform a particular job, and, upon successfully passing a certification exam, to represent a declaration of a particular individual’s professional competence.” Certification is a recognized standard and established requirement for employment across many disciplines. Evidence indicating the impact and effectiveness of certification in other fields has tremendous implications for employment support professionals and supported employment services. For example, studies suggest better outcomes for patients whose nurses are certified than for patients whose nurses are not certified (Blegen, 2012). Also, teachers who have standard certification have been reported to raise student test scores more than teachers who do not have certification or who have substandard certification (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005). These findings suggest that establishing a certification program for employment support professionals holds the promise to promote a stable and competent workforce that will, in turn, lead to positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Job coach certification has been a topic of discussion for more than two decades. Since its founding in 1988, APSE (now the *Association for People Supporting EmploymentFirst*) has worked to identify the essential competencies required to effectively perform the functions of an employment support professional (e.g., Training Resource Network & APSE, 2010). The next section describes the development of the certification process.

1.2 Certification development process

In October 2010, APSE launched an initiative to develop the first national certification program for employment support professionals. A proposal was developed to (a) establish national guidelines for the essential knowledge and skills necessary to provide integrated employment support

services, and (b) provide a credential for identifying employment support professionals who demonstrate these key competencies. The proposal to develop the Certified Employment Support Professional (CESP) credential was initiated and co-authored by Patricia K. Keul, Laura A. Owens, and Wendy S. Parent (Keul, Owens, & Parent, 2011). The process of developing the CESP required investigation and study of other credentialing programs, as well as discussions with multiple potential partners. The initial development of the CESP was funded in part through the Medicaid Infrastructure Grants (MIG) of five states (Arkansas, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota and Wisconsin). Partnerships with state MIG directors, vocational rehabilitation directors, the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, and others were established to create and market the new credential. Activities included promoting the certification of employment services professionals in partner states, hosting exam administrations, developing incentives to promote the establishment of a national cadre of certified employment services professionals, and identifying resources to assist state agencies to offset the cost of certification for employment services professionals.

The APSE Board of Directors responded to the demand for this long-awaited credentialing process by establishing the Employment Support Professional Certification Council (ESPCC). The ESPCC is charged with developing and overseeing the CESP program in compliance with the guidelines of the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA), the accrediting body of the Institute for Credentialing Excellence. National leaders and practitioners in the field of integrated employment were solicited to provide guidance and direction on all aspects of the development of the national certification program, including the development, piloting, validating, and implementation of a certification examination.

1.3 Certification examination

As an initial step in developing the certification examination, ESPCC conducted a Role Delineation Study (RDS) to identify and validate the core competencies required for effective entry-level ESP performance. In January 2011, a representative panel of nine subject matter experts (SMEs) was assembled to generate a list of job content elements performed by employment support

professionals, group the elements into content domains, and sequence the domains in the order in which they are typically performed. A survey was developed based on the work of the SME group.

Following piloting, the final survey was administered to practitioners to determine the frequency with which specific knowledge and skills are used and the criticality of the knowledge and skill to successful client outcomes. More than 20% of the APSE membership of 2500 (in 2011) and a larger network of contacts recruited to participate in the Role Delineation Study completed the online survey. Survey results were used to develop an exam content outline, or blueprint, in which knowledge and skills with high ratings for frequency and criticality received greater emphasis on the exam (i.e., more test items) than did knowledge and skills that had low frequency and criticality ratings. Based on the empirical data, five content domains were established containing a total of 80 content elements. The five domain areas include (a) application of core values and principles to practice, (b) individualized assessment and employment/career planning, (c) community research and job development, (d) workplace and related supports, and (e) ongoing supports (see Figure 1). The examination content outline is available in the Appendix.

After the job relatedness, or relevancy, of the certification exam was established through the RDS, a diverse group of exam question writers was recruited and trained to prepare questions for the exam. Questions were subsequently reviewed by additional SMEs before being assembled into an exam for a final quality check and review. The Certified Employment Support Professional (CESP) examination currently contains 135 multiple-choice questions and is administered in paper-and-pencil format. To enhance the face and content validity of the exam, many items present realistic scenarios that may be encountered in employment support situations and test takers are instructed to identify the best answer from among the alternatives provided. The examination meets the requirements of the test specifications with respect to content and weighting. The passing point for the exam was established using a criterion-reference technique.

A secure database of “banked” items enables the development of multiple versions of the CESP exam. After each administration of the exam, question statistics are calculated and reviewed along with

candidate feedback to identify any concerns or areas for improvement. When appropriate, questions are removed from grading. Following this quality assurance step, exam grading is finalized and score reports are issued to candidates. The ESPCC oversees a continual process of question writing, review, and evaluation to ensure that exam content remains up-to-date, accurate, and consistent with the content outline.

1.4 Certification requirements

The CESP credential is designed for job coaches, job developers, job placement personnel, transition from school-to-work personnel, and employment specialists/consultants who serve a wide variety of target audiences including people with intellectual disabilities, mental health impairments, sensory impairments, physical disabilities and multiple health impairments, traumatic brain injury, and autism. The CESP credential is based upon defined professional competencies and evidence based practices for the profession, such that earning the CESP credential validates the quality and effectiveness of employment services and provides recognition for ESPs who have demonstrated the skills and competence to provide quality employment support services. Eligibility requirements for test takers include education, experience, and code of conduct requirements to insure that individuals certified by ESPCC have an acceptable level of knowledge (as demonstrated by the exam requirements) and skill (as demonstrated by the experience requirement) needed to provide employment support services at an entry level of competency. To maintain active certification status, CESP holders are required to either complete 36 ESP-related continuing education (CE) credits during each 3-year period or pass the exam prior to the recertification deadline.

2. Employment Support Professionals' Perspectives on Certification

2.1 Purpose of the study

The CESP examination was first administered in New Hampshire on May 1, 2011 and was rolled out in other states soon afterward. The purpose of the present study was to provide a snapshot of this initial group of CESP holders and to explore their reasons for pursuing certification as well as their perceptions of the value of holding the CESP credential. Three research questions guided the investigation:

1. Who pursues the CESP credential?
2. Why do they pursue the CESP credential?
3. What are the perceived outcomes of certification?

The results of this descriptive study are expected to provide insights into the initial stage of implementation of the CESP program and to guide the ESPCC in its program evaluation and expansion efforts.

2.2 Method

Data were collected through a survey of CESP holders who earned the credential between the dates of May 2011 and December 2012. We sent emails to the 219 individuals who successfully completed the CESP examination during this time period and invited them to participate in an online survey study about their perceptions of the Employment Support Professional Certification Program. Of the 219 emails sent out, 22 were returned as undeliverable. Ninety-three (93) of the 197 individuals who received the email responded to our invitation and completed the survey for a response rate of 47%. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

A 24-item survey instrument was developed to collect data relevant to the research questions. The survey requested demographic and employment information from respondents through open- and closed-ended questions about why participants chose to pursue the CESP credential and the perceived personal and/or professional impacts of holding the credential. Survey data were collected anonymously using SurveyMonkey online survey software. We examined the frequency distributions and qualitative responses to individual survey items. The results of the descriptive data analysis and qualitative content analysis are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

2.3 Findings

2.3.1 Who are Certified Employment Support Providers?

Table 1 presents the demographic and employment characteristics of the sample. The majority of respondents were female, over 40 years of age, Caucasian, held a bachelor's or master's degree, and most

(88%) had completed the CESP examination 6 months to 2 years prior to completing the survey. The length of time respondents had worked in the field of disability employment varied considerably, with nearly one-third (30%) reporting they had been in the field 1 to 5 years while greater than one-third (39%) reported more than 16 years of service. Despite the relatively high percentage of respondents with extensive backgrounds in the disability employment field, the majority indicated they had been in their *current* position for only 1 to 5 years.

When asked to describe their current job position, the largest number of respondents (37) identified themselves as direct support professionals who spend most of their time assisting individuals obtain or maintain employment; frontline supervisors of direct support professionals (13) and administrators (21) were also well represented in the sample. More than one-quarter (29%) of respondents reported employment through a private community rehabilitation provider that provides integrated employment services alongside services such as skill development and work activity, 24% reported working for a public human services agency such as a developmental disabilities or mental health agency. Smaller numbers reported working for public employment agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation; private employment support providers that focus exclusively on delivering integrated employment services; non-profit agencies; or schools and universities.

2.3.2 Why do they pursue the CESP credential?

Because we were interested in understanding what motivates employment support professionals to pursue certification, respondents were asked to describe why they chose to become a CESP. Many respondents indicated that pursuing CESP certification was a way to demonstrate their competence, enhance their professional credentials, and advance in their careers. As one respondent stated it, “I wanted to insure that I continue to stay on the cutting edge of service delivery, design, philosophy and ethics.” Another respondent chose to become a CESP “to obtain credentials to back up my expertise” while others did it “to add a level of professionalism to the work I do” or “to separate myself from others in the field.” Some respondents reported that they were encouraged or required to pursue certification by their employers. Finally, several respondents indicated that, as trainers of employment support staff, they

wanted to take the CESP exam to ensure that their trainings covered the topical areas of the examination. The next section will explore the question of whether the outcomes of receiving the CESP designation met test-takers' expectations.

2.3.3. What are perceived outcomes of professional certification?

To examine the value of the CESP designation from the perspective of those who hold the credential, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, "Having my CESP has offered personal and/or professional benefits to me." Over half (61%) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, and 23% indicated that they were unsure of the impact. Respondents were then presented with a list of possible benefits of certification and asked to select all that applied to them. The benefits endorsed most often were (a) personal satisfaction, (b) confirms my knowledge and ability, and (c) feeling of accomplishment. See Table 2 for additional benefits endorsed by study participants.

When asked what impact obtaining the CESP credential has had on their job or career, some respondents reported that they have garnered credibility in the field, received a raise or promotion, or experienced greater job security. However, others indicated that holding the CESP credential has not impacted their job or career. A similar level of uncertainty was noted in response to two other questions: "Do you feel there are other opportunities available to you as a result of having your certification?" (40% reported being unsure) and "Do you feel other employers in the field recognize certification in their hiring decisions?" (46% reported being unsure). Comments such as "I think it [the CESP] needs to be promoted more as a recognized certification," "I think it's in its infancy stage. I do feel in the future it will have far more validation than it does now," and "it needs to build to have credibility in the industry," reflect the perception on the part of some CESP holders that the effects of holding the CESP credential are not yet fully known. The fact that most respondents had held the CESP credential for less than two years at the time of the survey should also be considered when interpreting the seemingly high level of uncertainty expressed in response to these questions. It is possible that it was too soon for CESP holders to have realized the full

benefits of certification. Nonetheless, most respondents were satisfied with their decision to pursue certification and 97% indicated they would recommend becoming a CESP to others.

2.4 Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this descriptive study provide a snapshot of the demographic and employment characteristics of the initial group of individuals who earned the CESP credential. Respondents identified a variety of motivations for pursuing certification and the majority reported that the credential has offered them personal as well as professional benefits. A certain level of uncertainty expressed about the impacts of credentialing on career opportunities points to the need for future research in this area and continued efforts to establish and promote the value of CESP credential. While the CESP is a relatively new credential, it is clear from this pilot study that there is an interest and need for a national credentialing program for employment support professionals.

3. Future Directions

3.1 Ongoing research and development

The CESP credential program was initiated in response to a need to develop a stable and competent employment support workforce equipped to promote positive outcomes for job seekers with disabilities. A national certification program with identified requisite knowledge and skills for professional practice and established methods to assess these competencies has the potential to significantly improve the quality of employment services provided throughout the United States and internationally. What is needed is ongoing research to inform necessary developments in the CESP certification program, including efforts to validate and improve the certification program and to explore the impacts of that credentialing has services and outcomes. For example, future studies will examine the relationship between CESP exam scores and supervisor ratings of workers' on-the-job performance to test the hypothesis that higher exam scores will be associated with increased worker competence across the exam content area domains. Assessing the relationship between CESP credential status or exam scores and the employment outcomes of individuals served would provide an even more critical test of the value of certification. Validation studies such as these would provide a direct response to questions raised by

vocational rehabilitation directors, community rehabilitation provider managers, employment support professionals, and advocates wanting to know if certification is a good investment.

3.2 Roll-out of the national CESP credentialing program

Of the 545 individuals who completed the CESP examination between May 2011 and December 2013, 453 (83%) achieved a passing score on the exam and earned the CESP credential. As more individuals become certified, it is critical to determine the impact and value of certification from the perspectives of employers, provider agencies, ESPs, and individuals receiving employment supports. Our experience suggests that having a national certification is only half of the equation for change; building capacity within systems at the national, state, and provider level is essential for expanding the visibility of—and access to—competent employment support professionals. Currently several states, including New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Kentucky, encourage or have plans to require the certification of employment support professionals. CSAVR has also expressed its support of the CESP credential in light of the recognized need for state vocational rehabilitation agencies to work with qualified employment support professionals (Rita Martin, personal communication, 2012).

In sum, establishing a strong national certification program will assure that employment support professionals meet nationally accepted, key competency standards based on current state-of-the-art practice in the field. National certification will provide practitioners with the professional recognition to enable them to lobby for better wages and benefits, as has occurred within other human services professions that have instituted certification programs. In addition, organizations that hire CESPers will have a case for seeking funding increases from various public agencies that fund supported employment services. Finally, external certification will validate and support the training currently provided by various training institutes, colleges, and universities across the country and will provide a career ladder for staff who commit to becoming nationally certified.

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Appendix A

CESP Examination Content Outline

Domain 1: Application of Core Values and Principles to Practice (13-17%)

1. All people have the right to work and are entitled to equal access to employment in the general workforce
2. Zero exclusion
3. Disability etiquette
4. People First Language
5. Job seeker strengths interests and talents
6. Full inclusion in the general workforce
7. Self determination and empowerment
8. Providing services outside institutional and workshop settings
9. Involvement of job seeker in the employment process as a collaborative effort that includes paid and non-paid supports
10. Impact of employment services history on current practice
11. Legislation and regulations related to employment
12. Funding sources for employment services

Domain 2: Individualized Assessment and Employment/Career Planning (23-29%)

13. Rights and responsibilities related to disclosure of disability
14. Counseling job seeker on disability disclosure
15. Practices unique to school-to-work
16. Rapid engagement in the employment process
17. Limitations of traditional vocational evaluation for job seekers with significant disabilities
18. Motivational interviewing techniques
19. Interviews with job seeker and others familiar with his/her abilities and work history

20. Impact of job seeker's demographic, cultural, and social background
21. Reviewing job seeker's records and collecting pertinent employment information
22. Job seeker in his/her current daily routines and environments
23. Benefit analysis for job seeker
24. Strategies to reduce or eliminate entitlement benefits
25. Non-work needs that may impact successful employment (e.g. transportation, counseling, food assistance, financial housing)
26. Job seeker's preferred style of learning, skills, talents, and modes of communication
27. Integration of relevant employment information into a vocational profile that reflects job seeker's interests, goals, and aspirations
28. Community-based situational assessment
29. Paid work trials and job tryouts
30. Volunteering
31. Job shadowing
32. Informational interviews
33. Self-employment resources for job seekers
34. Referrals to appropriate agencies, organizations, and networks based on career plans

Domain 3: Community Research and Job Development (19-25%)

35. Gathering and analyzing labor trend information
36. Identifying patterns in job markets
37. Disability etiquette
38. Maintaining updated information on businesses, type of jobs available, and locations of jobs within the community
39. Developing and communicating effective marketing and messaging tools for employment
40. Positioning the agency as an employment service

41. Targeting message to specific audience
42. Using language and images that highlight abilities and interests of job seekers
43. Developing job seeker portfolios
44. Informational interviews with businesses
45. Mentoring job seekers during the job search process
46. Workplace culture and climate awareness and sensitivity
47. Strategies for job matching
48. Strategies for contacting and communicating with employers
49. Employment proposals based on business and job seeker's preferences
50. Responding to the employer concerns about job seeker's abilities and interests
51. Responding to the employer concerns about job seeker's disabilities
52. Incentives to businesses when hiring job seekers with disabilities (e.g. tax credits, on-the-job training, diversity goals)

Domain 4: Workplace and Related Supports (27-33%)

53. Communicating with job seeker/employee and his/her natural and paid supports
54. Impact of earned income on entitlements
55. Transportation for work
56. Family support
57. Housing/residential staff cooperation
58. Gathering clear job expectations from employers
59. Preparing and coordinating for the first day on job
60. Developing and implementing job analysis
61. Ensuring typical employer provided orientation
62. Ensuring introduction of employee to co-workers
63. Helping employee meet employer expectations regarding workplace culture

64. Facilitating co-worker relationships and workplace connections
65. Identifying employer's training process and supplementing if needed
66. Recognizing and adapting supports to individual learning styles and needs
67. Baseline assessment from a task analysis
68. Employee attending typical training program
69. Training schedule and instructional procedures
70. Positive/negative behavior and intervention supports
71. Reinforcement procedures including naturally occurring reinforcers and natural cues
72. Use of data collection to monitor progress
73. Collaborating with employee, employer, co-workers, and support team to develop and implement a plan and strategies for fading supports
74. Adapting and recommending accommodations to facilitate job performance
75. Promoting the use of universal design principles

Domain 5: Ongoing Supports (6-8%)

76. Scope and limitation of funding sources for ongoing support
77. Access to community resources and supports (e.g. transportation, counseling, food assistance, financial housing)
78. Impact on benefits/entitlements as earned income changes and ongoing access to benefits counseling (e.g., Community Work Incentive Coordinators)
79. Collaboration with employees, employers, and family members to ensure successful employment
80. Support employees for job and/or career advancement

Table 1

Sample Demographic and Employment Characteristics (N = 93)

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	22	24
Female	71	76
Age		
21-30	11	12
31-40	19	20
41-50	30	32
Over 50	33	35
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	6	6
Hispanic American	2	2
White/Caucasian	85	91
Highest Level of Education		
GED	2	2
High School	13	14
Associate Degree	6	6
Bachelor's Degree	43	46
Master's Degree	28	30
Doctoral Degree	1	1
Length of Time Working in Disability		
Employment Field		
1-5 years	30	32

6-10 years	17	18
11-15 years	11	12
More than 16 years	35	38
Length of Time in Current Position		
Less than 1 year	5	5
1-5 years	54	58
6-10 years	15	16
11-15 years	9	10
More than 16 years	10	11
Current Employment Position		
Direct support professional	39	42
Frontline supervisor	13	14
Administrator	21	23
Other ^a	20	22
Agency Type		
Public employment agency	5	5
Public human services agency	24	26
Public or private school	4	4
Private employment support provider	15	16
Private Community Rehabilitation Provider	26	28
Other ^b	19	21
Current Salary		
\$20,000 or less	7	8
\$20,001-\$30,000	20	22
\$30,001-\$40,000	30	32

\$40,001-\$50,000	17	18
Over \$50,000	19	20

^aParticipants indicating *other* for Current Employment Position commonly reported performing multiple roles or working in education and training (e.g., special education teacher, or consultant/trainer). ^bThe majority of participants indicating *other* for Agency Type reported working for a non-profit agency or university.

Table 2

Perceived Benefits of CESP Certification (N = 93)

Benefit	<i>n</i>	%
Personal satisfaction	86	92
Confirms my knowledge and ability	75	81
Feeling of accomplishment	69	74
Validates competence to others	66	71
Demonstrates my commitment to the profession	64	69
Demonstrates my professional standard of competence	63	68
Provides professional recognition	54	58
Enhances professional credibility with employers, families, and individuals with disabilities	52	56
Differentiates me from my colleagues without certification	49	53
Increased confidence	50	54
Provides for life-long professional growth	34	37
Provides opportunities for career advancement	24	26
Improved job satisfaction	22	24
Increased earnings	7	8

Note. Benefits are not mutually exclusive. Respondents may have endorsed more than one benefit.

Figure 1. This figure illustrates the 5 content domains of the CESP examination and the percentage of questions in each domain.

