

# Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project

## Customized Employment Topic: Social Capital

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*Social capital refers to the collective value of all social networks [who people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other [norms of reciprocity].*

*Robert Putnam*



### Introduction

Relationships form as people interact with each other at home, work, and in the community. Relationships help create a quality life and are critical to a person's well-being. There is data indicating that positive relationships contribute to longevity and happiness. Physically being in the community; however, does not mean being of the community, or said another way, belonging to a community. Belonging takes more than a physical presence.

A community is defined as the places where people have the opportunity to interact and form connections; where trust in and respect for each other can build; and where the norm is to help each other. These characteristics of relationships connect individuals and result in Social Capital. Social capital has multiple definitions, interpretations, and uses, but in all cases, social connectedness is the central premise. It refers to relationships, social networks and how people help one another. Additionally, critical to the concept of Social Capital is the idea of reciprocity, giving and receiving, the actions of supporting and helping and receiving support and help as needed.

### Examples of Social Capital

Social capital is found in friendships, networks, neighborhoods, spiritual communities, educational institutions, clubs, groups, civic associations, etc. Working, volunteering, entertaining, participating, advocating, exercising etc. are the means through which people develop or enhance their Social Capital.

*Mr. Cobb is John's neighbor, and he is mentoring John in small engine repair. He teaches John about cars including the names of tools and how to use them. To show his appreciation, John washes Mr. Cobb's vehicles and farm machinery. When John transitioned from high school, Mr. Cobb hired him as an assistant in his engine repair business.*

*Maggie is teaching Juanita how to bake desserts and Juanita "baby sits" for Maggie when she goes to the grocery store.*

*Mia and Emma participate in a group that focuses on personal growth. Mia is interested in working in the area of health and beauty. Emma connected her with Alicia who owns the spa that Emma uses. This helped Mia learn about careers and various jobs and tasks involved in the health and beauty industry.*

*Calla is a member of a book club that meets in a bookstore where she lives. Jennifer works at the bookstore during the time the book club meets, and she and Calla developed a routine of spending a few minutes chatting before the book club begins. When an opening became available at the bookstore, Jennifer asked Calla if she was interested. Calla interviewed and accepted the position.*

## The Importance of Social Capital for Employment

Research shows that isolation has a negative impact on a person's physical and emotional health. When people are not engaged in relationships, they become isolated. Individuals with disabilities typically have fewer opportunities to form relationships outside of a service delivery system that is paid to support them. Without social connectedness, people with disabilities may not develop valued roles in their communities. It denies them the opportunity to develop important relationships and social connections that could increase their quality of life and create employment opportunities.

Social Capital benefits and is important to everyone's career path. Many job seekers with and without disabilities obtain employment because of who they know or who their network of friends know. Social Capital supports a person's employment goals by strengthening and expanding the number of people who may be willing to help while creating a sense of competence within the job seeker. The individual may also benefit from the Social Capital of others in their networks.

Mentorship and social networks are important aspects of career building. When individuals initially meet as a result of a common interest, they are already well on the way to building a relationship. Linking the job seeker based on vocational themes, educational and interest groups, as well as creating mentorship opportunities can be invaluable outcomes of Discovery, Job Search, and Job Development. Mentors working in positions that fall within the vocational theme(s) of a job seeker can provide valuable knowledge about work, job tasks, skills needed, ideas, business leads, and insight into where the job seekers skills would be a good fit.

## Examples of Social Capital for Employment

*Forrest loves music, especially "The Motown Sound". When discussing his life goals, Forrest identified music as something he wants more of in his life. Forrest teamed with Walker to work on this goal, since they both love the same kinds of music. They often talk about the social and political events occurring at the time certain songs were written. Walker is connected to the music scene where Forrest lives. He has worked in some of the recording studios and knows producers, singers/performers, and musicians. Walker has the Social Capital that can benefit Forrest by "opening up" opportunities for him to explore music, learn more about music entertainment, and build relationships with individuals who*

*Prakash and his daughter, Kiara participate in an annual Father and Daughter Trip organized through a travel agency owned by Tamara. Kiara is known for her friendly, thoughtful manner and her love of life and adventure. The father and daughter have been doing this for six years, since Kiara was in elementary school. They also attend a monthly gathering that the travel agency hosts.*

*When Tamara's son, Christopher, and his wife, Meghan, expanded their horse boarding business to include Historical Tours on horseback, Tamara thought of Kiara. A job was customized that meets Kiara's ideal conditions of employment and the needs of the business owners. Kiara is well matched to the culture of the business, which was a critical factor for Christopher and Meghan.*

*Kiara greets customers, hands them the clipboard to sign in, helps them select safety helmets, and ensures each customer reads and signs the safety forms. When the tour ends, she gathers and places the safety helmets in their cubby. She also keeps the office area clean and neat; organizes and stocks items for sale such as tee-shirts and jackets, reusable water bottles, and books; and answers the phone. This allows Christopher and Meghan to care for the horses between tours*

*while Kiara takes care of the office tasks.*

## How to Develop and Enhance Social Capital

Supporting individuals to have fuller lives requires the support team to:

- Teach the individual how to make choices.
- Assist with identifying skills, interests, preferences from a strengths-based perspective.
- Create opportunities for individuals to talk to, connect with, give to, and share with others.
- Help individuals incorporate into their daily routines community relationship building.
- Create opportunities for individuals to meet with others who share the same interests.
- Guide individuals in locating community places where people with similar interests congregate, spend time, and come together.
- Ensure individuals have a presence and are participating in activities that occur in favorite community places, “over and over” so there are opportunities to develop friendships out of familiarity, i.e. repeated interactions over time.
- Use Employment Best Practices to support individuals in becoming employed.

## Person-Centered, Interest-Based Volunteering

When agencies discontinue planning the same volunteer experiences for everyone and stop taking individuals in groups to volunteer, individuals may have the opportunity for person-centered volunteer experiences. Volunteering must never take the place of supporting the individual to become employed, delay opportunities for employment, or make the person who is employed miss work to volunteer. Individuals must offer their services freely and without coercion.

Individuals with disabilities may volunteer for religious, charitable, or similar non-profit organizations but may not volunteer services to for-profit private sector businesses as guided by the Fair Labor Standards Act. They also should not replace workers without disabilities who are paid by the business or organization to do the same job duties. In other words, a person with a disability should never volunteer to do work that an individual without a disability is paid to perform. If a person is involved in a volunteer position as part of the career-planning process, information must be gathered and align with the person’s employment interests, preferences, and career plans.

## Examples of Social Capital and Person-Centered, Interest-Based Volunteering

*Firash loves animals. Whenever he has the choice, his day is spent with dogs, puppies, cats, kittens, snakes, lizards, turtles and fish. He loves them all! He joined an animal rights advocacy group that promotes animal welfare and provides public education regarding responsible animal care. He is currently involved in the process of job development with Nathan, an employment specialist. Firash’s conditions for employment must caring for, working with, and advocating for animals. His work with the advocacy group has been included on his Visual Resume along with a recommendation from Clint, the organization’s founder. Clint is using his Social Capital to create employment opportunities for Firash.*

*It does not take long to learn that Hannah loves books and movies and plays that are developed from books. She volunteers at the local library shelving books, assisting with surveys, looking for lost items, and helping with customer service. These are all tasks at the library that other volunteers without disabilities complete. The director of a local theater recently partnered with the library to form a Theater Library Association. The Chief Librarian knows of Hannah's interest in books and theater and introduced the two. It was coincidentally at a point when the director was feeling overwhelmed by his theater responsibilities and establishing the library project. He offered Hannah paid employment to assist him with the new project.*

## Implications for Organizations

For any relationship, individual or organizational to thrive and grow there must be both giving and receiving. Communities are stronger when citizens are actively engaged and participating in the community through relationship building. Organizations who provide supports and services to individuals with disabilities are uniquely positioned to assist in building strong diverse communities. Integrating relationship building into each individual's support plan is a valuable starting point. Social Capital then evolves into practice. Facilitating individuals to develop and enhance their Social Capital is one of the most effective and efficient ways to achieve state and federal policy mandates, such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Final Rule. Rehabilitation professionals must recognize that individuals with disabilities are asset rich citizens, and find ways to engage them in helping themselves and others. When this happens, communities are enriched.

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