

# Situational Assessment

## What is a Situational Assessment?

Situational assessment is a valuable tool for assisting a person with a disability to make choices about the types of jobs and work environments they would enjoy. Situational assessment (also known as job sampling, on-the-job assessment, or environmental assessment) is assessment using actual employment and community settings. Assessments in simulated work environments and in facility-based programs, such as sheltered workshops, simply do not contain the various nuances and variables of actual work environments, which are necessary to make an educated choice about employment options.

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With situational assessment, the job seeker gets a real choice through exposure to a variety of work environments and is not forced to rely on the opinion of professionals or family members about what kind of work is best for them. The job seeker and job developer can learn about the complete “reality” of the work environment, including task skill requirements, variety of tasks and activities on the job, social skill requirements, formality and rigidity of the work environment vs. informality, pace of activity, amount of personal interaction, and ultimately the comfort level of the job seeker with different environments. Occasionally the job seeker and job developer spend an enormous amount of time and energy pursuing a specific type of job based on very limited information of that particular field of work. Then, when the job seeker finally gets a job, they learn it is not a good match. Situational assessment allows the job seeker and job developer to learn new information quickly about employment options that are worth pursuing further and avoid wasting time on inappropriate job searches.

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Situational assessment reduces the risk both to the job seeker and the employer in the placement process. Particularly for job seekers who are somewhat ambivalent or concerned about working in the community, situational assessment expands their exposure to the community in a low-risk way. One of the criticisms of more traditional assessment techniques is that they evaluate work skills that have limited application in today’s workplace. Through situational assessment, the job seeker and job developer assess skills that are used in actual work environments.

Situational assessment can also help the job seeker more readily identify the availability of supports and support needs. Situational assessment allows the job seeker to evaluate their support needs in an actual work environment as well as evaluate the ability of the work environment to naturally provide those work supports. Situational assessment also helps deal with the issue of so-called “job readiness.” A major barrier people with disabilities face when seeking employment has often been the determination by experts that the individual isn’t “ready” to work in the community due to behavioral issues, lack of motivation, and other reasons. Yet experience has shown that when an individual is in a real work environment in the community,



those “issues” turn out to be non-issues. For example, “inappropriate” behavior in a facility-based program may be found to be perfectly appropriate for a work environment in the community, or the change in environment may cause the behavior to diminish or disappear.

Like any tool, situational assessment should be used in a sensitive manner, based on individual job seeker needs. For people with extensive work histories, and for those whose job goals have become clear through more traditional methods, situational assessment may not be appropriate. However, it can be helpful for people with little or no work experience, difficulties with communication, or people whose job goals are unclear.

## Identifying Assessment Sites

When identifying assessment sites, start with the job seeker’s preferences. What types of jobs have they expressed interest in? What types of ideas have been generated through the planning process that need further exploration? However, don’t necessarily be limited by the expressed interests of the job seeker. Remember, part of the purpose here is to help expand the job seeker’s horizons, so look for other work environments that could provide further information about the job seeker’s preferences and alternative choices for them.

The next step involves contacting employers to arrange situational assessments. Job placement methods, such as networking and cold calling, are used to set up situational assessments. However, contacting employers to set up situational assessments is considerably simpler than job development for actual placements, since the commitment you are asking from the employer is relatively small: the use of their facility, and a little bit of their time and cooperation. For example, let’s say you are working with someone who is interested in music, and one of their interests is working in a recording studio. You contact a studio and say something like, “I’m working with an individual who is interested in possibly working in a recording studio. At this point, we’re still identifying what tasks they could do in this type of environment. If possible, I would like to bring this person in to see your facilities and what you do and give them the opportunity to try out various jobs and tasks in the studio. Our agency would pay the person for performing this work, and there would be no cost to you.” From there, it would be a matter of negotiating the specifics of the assessment.

The following are basic guidelines for what to cover when meeting with employers to set up situational assessment:

- Provide a brief description of your agency and the job seekers you represent
- Give an overview of what situational assessment is and its advantages
- Learn about their business: What do they do and how do they do it?
- Identify specific areas and tasks to be part of the assessment process
- Be very clear about the parameters of the assessment: the purpose here is for evaluation, not to be extra help for the employer
- Emphasize the value you place on not inconveniencing the employer when situational assessments occur (i.e., you recognize they have a business to run)
- Solicit and respond to concerns
- Discuss specifics of setting up a situational assessment
- Provide written materials that reemphasize items discussed

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You may already have contacts and opportunities within your organization you can use to set up assessment sites:

- Use the networking contacts that already exist within your organization.
- Use employers who you previously contacted, had no current job openings, but seemed open to the possibility of hiring a worker with a disability.
- Use sites where you already have individuals working. If your agency has enclaves, or transitional employment, this involves simply adding an extra person. However, in cases where people are working in individual placements (which is hopefully the vast majority of the people served by your agency), this should be done with caution. If the person works for a large employer, with departments or sites that are separate from the person who already works there, this may be an option. However, you should not conduct the assessment side-by-side or near the person with a disability who is employed there.

When it is clear that there are no immediate employment prospects during job development, a good practice is to ask about using the employer's workplace for assessment. This can be a great way to develop relationships with employers over the long term, creating understanding in a gradual way of the capabilities of people with disabilities.

There are two approaches to developing assessment sites:

1. **Identifying sites for one-time use by a specific individual.**
2. **Developing several sites that can be used on a periodic basis, with assessments set up with a few days' notice.** This typically can be set up through informal agreements with employers (e.g., "We'll give you a call a few days ahead of time to let you know when someone is coming in for an assessment."). Having a number of sites pre-arranged can rapidly speed up the assessment process, rather than having to take the time to develop various sites for each individual you serve. However, if an individual has a specific interest for which an assessment site does not already exist, then you should arrange a new site should be arranged.

It's important to have several different types of employers available to use for assessment that represent the diversity of job seekers' interests and the wide array of employment opportunities available in the community.

Employers should be both traditional (e.g., retail, food service, janitorial) and non-traditional. It can also be helpful to have assessment sites with similar tasks, but different work environments to see the impact of different environments. For example, clerical work in a small office that employs 20 people is a very different experience from a large corporate employer with 2,000 employees.

Finally, it's important not to "burn out" employers. Part of the discussion with businesses in arranging assessments should be around how often they are comfortable with using their worksite for assessment. Agencies should be careful to not use the same assessment sites too often, both to provide more diverse assessment experiences for job seekers, and to maintain positive business relationships.

### **Length of the Assessment**

The length of the assessment is going to be very dependent on the people involved. In some cases, a few hours may be enough to provide sufficient information about a specific type of job or may be all that a person has the energy or tolerance for. In other cases, several days at the same job site may be appropriate. The decision should ultimately come down to determining the length of time it will take to gather sufficient information to make a decision about whether to move forward with job development in this particular type of work. In some cases, it may be necessary and worthwhile to do an assessment at the same site several times to allow the person an opportunity to get used to the work environment and tasks.

## Number of Assessments

Similar to the length of assessments, the number of assessments depends on the individual. For people who have a clear idea of what they want to do, you can conduct a couple of assessments to confirm their direction and provide some more specific information about areas for job development. For people who are unsure about what types of jobs they are interested in or are not sure what direction to go in, you may need to conduct many different assessments at a wide variety of employment sites.

## Doing the Assessment

Here are some basic guidelines for the actual assessment:

- Agency staff presence during the assessment is dependent on the person involved in the assessment and the employer. In general, err on the side of too much staff presence rather than too little, particularly with newer assessment sites. There are cases where individuals are independent, where the person may not be comfortable with ongoing staff presence, and where it may be stigmatizing. In those cases, staff presence should be lessened. There also may be assessment sites where there is a well-established relationship with the employer, and supervisors and co-workers feel comfortable being more involved in the assessment, handling issues that may arise.
- Ask the employer ahead of time about how staff will be informed about the assessment and how you may assist in creating understanding and comfort with what is occurring.
- Make sure the job seeker is dressed appropriately for the work environment and is aware of the purpose of the assessment.
- Ensure that the job seeker performs a variety of jobs and tasks within the work environment.
- Use some type of standardized tool to collect information so you can ensure a comprehensive assessment. Make sure the assessment includes evaluation of job skills and social and workplace culture considerations
- Encourage interaction between the individual with a disability and the employees who are working there.
- Be very conscious throughout the assessment about the work environment. Minimize the intrusion into the workplace and avoid creating a distraction.
- At the end of the assessment, get feedback from the job seeker and employer.

## What to Assess

Here is a list of some areas for exploration during situational assessment. Examine this information from two perspectives: 1) the criteria or requirements of the field or specific job in each of these areas and 2) the comfort level or ability of the job seeker to meet these requirements.

- Formality or informality of workplace
- Amount of supervision
- Level of interaction with co-workers and supervisors
- Camaraderie /interaction of employees
- Level of worker autonomy
- Variety of tasks
- Training required
- Stamina and endurance
- Mobility requirements
- Communication
- Production rate
- Strength: lifting and carrying
- Manual dexterity
- Reading requirements

- Mathematics/counting
- Level of independence required
- Customer contact
- Dress requirements
- Need to work independently
- Flexibility and changes in routine
- Complexity of tasks
- Repetitive nature of tasks
- Amount of self-initiative required
- Need/ability to tell time/time awareness
- Stress and pressure of position
- Need to ask for assistance
- Area orientation requirements
- Environment: noise, temperature, indoor/outdoor

### **Using Information from the Situational Assessment**

Once you have conducted a situational assessment, the job seeker can discuss the experiences with you and make decisions about the direction of the job search. This discussion should include things like

- what work environments the job seeker liked/disliked and why
- what tasks they did well and enjoyed performing
- tasks they found to be a challenge
- what places the job seeker felt comfortable
- things that were different than expected

Then, you can use information to target specific jobs and employers. The job seeker and the job developer can confidently state to prospective employers that the job seeker has spent time in work environments similar to the prospective employer and has demonstrated the ability to perform tasks and jobs within that work environment.

For people with high support needs who require some type of job creation or job carving, situational assessment can be a very useful tool in identifying those specific tasks that can be “carved out” to create a job. Suppose, for example, the job seeker is doing an assessment in an office environment. The results of the assessment indicate the job seeker is comfortable in that environment, they can handle sorting mail to about 30 people, can do simple copy work, and can do basic filing that involves matching documents to file names. However, the assessment showed that complex copy work (multi-page double-sided documents) and filing that requires high degrees of alphabetizing are tasks that go beyond the individual’s capabilities. The job developer and job seeker can then use the information to identify and create positions that consist of the tasks the individual did well on.

### **Situational Assessment as Job Try-Out**

So far, we have addressed the use of situational assessment as a major component of the planning and evaluation process prior to job development. However, there is another way you can use situational assessment: as a job “try-out” as part of the hiring decision. In essence, what occurs during the job developer’s negotiations with an employer is offering an opportunity to fully evaluate the individual’s ability to perform the tasks of the position by allowing them to try the job for a few hours, a day, or even a couple of days, at no obligation to the employer. If you plan to use situational assessment in this way, the following guidelines are important:

- It is imperative that the parameters of the assessment are clear to all involved, including the length of the assessment and at what point the hiring decision will be made.
- The person with a disability must be comfortable with the idea of situational assessment as a

job try-out. You can explain the benefits of using situational assessment as a job try-out but the job seeker must be comfortable with it.

- When using situational assessment for evaluation purposes, it is helpful to involve co-workers and supervisors. In the case of a job try-out however, it is essential to identify the fit between the individual and the work culture, identify supports available, and make sure the employer has sufficient information to make a hiring decision.
- When using situational assessment as a job try-out, you must explain clearly to the employer that the purpose is to determine whether the individual has the potential to successfully perform in the job over the long-term. The employer should not necessarily expect the individual to have “mastered” the job at the end of the assessment, particularly if they have a longer learning curve.

There are some concerns about stigmatizing the person with a disability when situational assessment is used as part of the actual hiring process. The basic concern is “people without disabilities don’t typically have to try out a job before they get hired, so why should people with disabilities?” This is a valid concern. However, consider the criteria that are typically used in hiring: performance in an interview, background and experience, and possibly the results of testing. Using the typical hiring process is always the preferred choice; however, the typical hiring process does not always create awareness for the potential employer about the strengths and abilities of an applicant with a disability. The reality for many people with disabilities is that the typical criteria are going to exclude them from being hired. Due to physical challenges in communicating, difficulties in verbally articulating their thoughts, or simply lack of experience in interviewing, some people with disabilities perform poorly in interviews. People with disabilities often have limited work experience that demonstrates their ability to perform successfully in the job. Limited academic skills can create challenges in performing on tests. In such cases, alternative strategies are important so people with disabilities can demonstrate to employers that they can perform the tasks of the job they apply for.

If you are using situational assessment as a job try-out, bear in mind that employers are not simply doing them a favor by allowing its use. Situational assessment as a job try-out should instead be portrayed as a reasonable accommodation, under the Americans with Disabilities Act, in lieu of the normal hiring process so the job applicant with a disability gets equal consideration. We also must bear in mind that part of job seeking is not just the employer deciding about whether they wish to hire a job seeker. The job seeker also needs to make an informed decision about whether they want to work in the type of job being considered, and for that particular employer, and situational assessment can provide that type of information.

In deciding whether or not to use situational assessment as a job try-out, consider the following:

- Can the job seeker properly represent their abilities through normal hiring processes of interviewing, testing, and assessment based on past work experience and education?
- How well does the job seeker communicate, interact, and respond to questions?
- Most importantly, what does the job seeker want, and what are they comfortable with?

Ultimately, the decision about using situational assessment as a job try-out comes down to the answer to the following question: Will the normal hiring process allow the individual with a disability to receive equal consideration along with other applicants? If not, then situational assessment as a job try-out may be a useful tool.

***Please note: The above information in this handout is based in part on materials and methods developed by Ellen Ball Nalven, Director of Employment Services at Our House, Inc., Berkeley Heights, NJ.***

## **The following is an excerpt from [USDOL Wage and Hour Division \(WHD\) Field Operations Handbook – Chapter 64, Section 64c08.1](#)**

***Students with disabilities and workers with disabilities who are enrolled in individual rehabilitation programs.***

### **Statements of Principle**

*The U.S. Department of Labor and community-based rehabilitation organizations are committed to the continued development and implementation of individual vocational rehabilitation programs that will facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities into employment within their communities. This transition must take place under conditions that will not jeopardize the protections afforded by the Fair Labor Standards Act to program participants, employees, employers or other programs providing rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities.*

*The U.S. Departments of Labor and Education are committed to the continued development and implementation of individual education programs, in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which will facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from school to employment within their communities. This transition must take place under conditions that will not jeopardize the protections afforded by the Fair Labor Standards Act to program participants, employees, employers, or programs providing rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities.*

### **Guidelines**

- c) *In an effort to promote vocational training for workers with disabilities, the WHD will not assert an employment relationship between the worker with a disability, the rehabilitation facility or school, and/or the business where the worker has been placed when all of the seven following criteria are met (note: the criteria are the same for both students and non-students enrolled in vocational rehabilitation programs):*
- (1) Participants are individuals with physical and/or mental disabilities for whom competitive employment at or above the minimum wage level is not immediately obtainable, and who, because of their disability, will need intensive ongoing support to perform in a work setting.*
  - (2) Participation is for vocational exploration, assessment, or training in a community-based worksite under the general supervision of rehabilitation organization personnel, or in the case of a student with a disability, public school personnel.*
  - (3) Community-based placements must be clearly defined components of individual rehabilitation programs developed and designed for the benefit of each individual.*
    - a. Each student with a disability shall have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that lists the needed transition services established for the exploration, assessment, training, or cooperative vocational education components.*
    - b. Each participant in a community-based rehabilitation organization program must have an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) that includes a statement of needed transition services established for exploration, assessment, or training components. In the past, these plans were called Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plans.*
  - (4) Documentation will be provided to the WHD upon request that reflects that the individual is enrolled in the community-based placement program, that this enrollment is voluntary, and that there is no expectation of remuneration. However, the information contained in the IEP or IPE does not have to be disclosed to the*

*WHD. The individual with a disability and, when appropriate, the parent or guardian of each individual must be fully informed of the IEP or IPE and the community-based placement component of the plan.*

*(5) The activities of the individuals with disabilities (i.e., participants) at the community-based placement site do not result in an immediate advantage to the business. Factors that would indicate the business is advantaged by activities of the individual include:*

- a. Displacement of regular employees*
- b. Vacant positions have been filled with participants rather than regular employees*
- c. Regular employees have been relieved of assigned duties*
- d. Participants are performing services that, although not ordinarily performed by employees, clearly are of benefit to the business*
- e. Participants are under continued and direct supervision of employees of the business rather than representatives of the rehabilitation facility or school*
- f. Placements are made to accommodate the labor needs of the business rather than according to the requirements of the individual's IEP or IPE*
- g. The IEP or IPE does not specifically limit the time spent by the participant at any one site, or in any clearly distinguishable job classification*

*(6) While the existence of an employment relationship will not be determined exclusively on the basis of the number of hours spent in each activity, as a general rule, an employment relationship is presumed not to exist when each of the three components does not exceed the following limitations:*

- a. Vocational explorations: 5 hours per job experienced*
- b. Vocational assessment: 90 hours per job experienced*
- c. Vocational training: 120 hours per job experienced*

*In the case of students, these limitations apply during any one school year.*

*(7) Individuals are not entitled to employment at the business at the conclusion of the IEP or IPE. However, if an individual becomes an employee, he or she cannot be considered a trainee at that particular community-based placement unless in a different, clearly distinguishable occupation.*

- d) An employment relationship will exist unless all of the criteria described in FOH 64c08(c) are met. If an employment relationship is found to exist, the employer will be held responsible for full compliance with the FLSA.*
- e) Business and rehabilitation organizations may, at any time, consider participants to be employees and pay them the full minimum wage required by section 6(a) or the SCA. Properly certified employers may also pay subminimum wages to participants who are disabled for the work being performed. Employees under age 20 may be paid the youth opportunity wage as provided by section 6(g) of the FLSA rather than a subminimum wage. The youth opportunity wage may never be the prevailing wage upon which a commensurate wage is based.*

