

Pathways to Competitive Integrated Employment

Justin's Story



Meet Justin, a young man who enjoys testing his luck with lottery scratch-off tickets. When his sheltered work program was forced to close due to the Covid pandemic, Justin and his coworkers were sent home. Justin, who lives with his grandmother, Dottie, spent his days largely isolated with little meaningful activity to break up the boredom. That is, until one day when an enormous opportunity came knocking in the form of Arc Evansville's Jack Maxwell and his employment services team.

Justin, age 34, had resigned himself to a career defined within the walls and contracts of the sheltered workshop setting. There were days, according to his grandmother, when he simply didn't want to go. Most of the time, however, Justin arrived at the workshop, worked a full day, and returned home. At the time, the workshop had a contract with Cintas, a company offering uniform and work apparel, facility services, first aid and safety products, and additional services. Through the arrangement with Cintas, Justin gained a good deal of experience, sorting and detangling wire hangers.

Finding Purpose at Cintas

In July of 2021, the Arc's employment services program, Community Job Link, received a call from Cintas management. Jack Maxwell fielded the call and quickly realized the opportunity. Cintas was interested in a direct hire. While Covid stopped workshop activity, Cintas's need for hanger sorting was becoming pronounced.

Jack talked to Justin and his grandmother to gauge Justin's potential interest in working at Cintas. They set up a one-day tryout, typical for Cintas, and Justin was offered the job paying \$14 an hour. Justin is responsible for doing the same tasks he was completing while at the workshop. He works 20 hours weekly and in July 2024, he'll have worked at Cintas for three years.

Money and Friends

Justin will tell you the best part of his new job is "money." People describe him as someone who "keeps McDonalds in business" and who "likes to try his luck." Justin gleefully boasts that he recently won \$50 on a scratch off, but that he usually wins \$2 or \$3. He and his grandmother will use his earned money for an upcoming purchase of new bedroom

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furniture and a chair. When asked what he likes to do with his money, Justin loudly replies, "Keep it!"

Money is important, but so are friendships. Justin shares that one of the best parts of his job is "making friends." He adds, "My best friend is Matt, Bill, and Aaron." Dottie agrees that Justin has met several new friends at Cintas. She reflects, "He is not like an outsider. They talk to him and visit with him and help him along the way." Dottie says the transition is going well because, "From the very first day, someone took to him, and he was ready to go back."

Justin knows which vehicles his friends drive and is excited to know he will see Matt that day when he sees his truck. When Justin leaves work, Dottie says, "he is surrounded by people talking to him. They all know him, and they don't shy away from him. He is included in everything they do."

There were days, while attending the workshop, when Justin didn't want to get out of bed and go to work. Since beginning his job at Cintas, those days are history. Justin doesn't miss work. He and his grandmother attribute this to his job satisfaction. The work tasks and the social environment, or workplace culture, are a good fit for Justin. **Read more about the importance of "fit" in "Key Ingredients to Success," below.**

Navigating Challenges

While Justin was familiar with sorting hangers, the Cintas environment was completely new. As such, Justin's employment service provider worked with Cintas personnel to provide the right amount of job training. Too much support would have been disrespectful; too little support would have been dismissive.

Justin's supervisor, Tyler, and the job coach, Kwristi, have devised the right blend of supports to assist Justin as he acclimated to the ongoing job demands. Kwristi has reduced the time she spends at Cintas, and co-workers provide immediate needs while Justin is at work. Justin says, "Kwristi is my job coach,

and she helps me. She helps me count the hangers I have done," and Tyler "helps me with the bent ones."

At one point, Justin had trouble when he was required to wear gloves for hand protection while sorting. Wire hangers can become abrasive to the skin and may scratch or wound the hand. The gloves were a protective strategy but, according to Justin, they were clumsy and made it difficult to rotate and align the hangers. So even though Cintas and the Arc tried out new and varying glove styles, in the end, the gloves were abandoned. Flexibility is key. Problem solved!

Justin's job at Cintas means that it's sometimes challenging for the family to meet everyone's scheduling needs. The family reports they "make it work." Justin currently enjoys transportation support from his grandmother, who takes him to and from work. Good transportation solutions, a common issue of concern for individuals and families, will play a key role in terms of long-term success for Justin.

Ingredients for Success

- **Partnership:** Working collaboratively is an essential characteristic of an effective team. Justin's case manager, employment services staff, family, and employer representatives have been key to Justin's success.
- **Natural supports:** In the past, a job coach was often the primary, sometimes sole workplace support. We now recognize the value of natural support using already available resources, including co-workers and supervisors, as distinctly vital elements facilitating success.
- **Flexible services:** Justin, like many other people, benefits when services are flexible enough to meet individualized needs. An agency's or professional's ability to recognize this and act upon it reflects person-centered values and is respectful of individual differences.

- **Finding the best fit:** Business or company culture characteristics vary widely. Matching a business culture to the employee can facilitate success. Justin's story highlights the importance of good fit. During employee orientation, Cintas explains that they do not have employees; they have "family members." A few examples: Cintas gave out pies on March 14, Pi Day. They have a hot dog cart on National Hot Dog Day, and they have a family picnic day.
- **Richness of role models:** In Justin's case several individuals act as role models and provide primary motivation for him. Justin's grandmother shares, "It helps his attitude and teaches him how to talk to other people, because they are all different. He tries to imitate or relate to them and talk to them in ways he did not do here at the workshop." In other words, the opportunity to practice new social skills is a benefit of community integrated employment.

Words of Wisdom

For those considering a transition to competitive employment, keep in mind:

- If you are attending a workshop and uncertain about exploring a competitive, integrated job, the collective message from Justin and his grandmother is "give it a try." People might find out they like that new job, and that they will meet people who care about them.
- If you are unsure about how wages will affect Social Security benefits, reach out to someone who can give you input about how to manage the money. Justin and his grandmother received accurate and up-to-date information about earned income from Community Job Link's benefit liaison expertise. If you are working with Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation, ask your counselor about benefits counseling through your employment service provider.
- You and your family should begin gathering information about earned income as soon as possible so you'll know how those earnings could affect choices for supports and services.
- It's important to select the right employment service provider. Providers with trained, knowledgeable staff who have expertise about how to successfully guide people will be key to *your* success. Dottie says, people need a guide to lead the way. Justin "wouldn't be where he is today without the Arc and Jack."



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