What is (and what isn’t) supported employment?

What is supported employment? Precision in definition is foundational to the development of quality supported employment services. The characteristics below defining quality supported employment, are derived from the work of Michael Callahan, President of Marc Gold & Associates:

1. Involves one person at a time, not a group.
2. Uses qualitative strategies such as Discovery rather than comparative evaluations to guide employment plans.
3. Reflects job seeker interests and contribution.
4. Occurs in regular workplaces in the community or in self-owned businesses.
5. Offers the flexibility and supports for the job seeker to pursue either competitive employment or customized employment to attain a meaningful job.
6. Involves a direct employment relationship with the employer, not a human service agency.
7. Includes on-going, personally determined job site supports, reasonable accommodations and rehabilitation technology, as needed.
8. Promotes the opportunity for typical interactions, supports and participation with others in the workplace.
9. Provides the opportunity for a living wage, advancement in wages and responsibilities and a satisfying career. (Involves pay of at least minimum wage.)

What isn’t supported employment? In the same way that it’s important to define quality characteristics of supported employment, it’s worth being clear about what supported employment is not. Below are examples of misunderstandings about supported employment:

1. Stopping by local businesses, picking up applications, completing these, and hoping to get hired in an available job.
2. Having an employment specialist (job coach) predetermined as the person providing instruction on the job.
3. Putting the employment specialist on the job with the supported employee all of the time (without a well-defined and justified support need for such).
4. Abandoning people on the job without needed support, including not providing regular follow-up with people (regarding job advancements, problem solving...).
5. Small groups of people with disabilities (sometimes called enclaves) working in the same business.
6. Reverse integration, or developing a business for people with disabilities and then inviting non-disabled people to be employees.
7. A “readiness” model.
8. Merely talking about jobs with a person wanting a job, while doing nothing toward the person actually getting a job.