In Conversation Series, Irish Families Leading Change, Positive Pathways.

Building the right supports around us within our chosen Communities

By Molly O'Keeffe

INSIGHTS

Reframing our Approach and Mindset to our Recruitment Needs.

OVERVIEW

When thinking of personal support structure in our own lives, we naturally separate out the paid or professional supports and the informal/relationship-based supports. This helps us to attach the skill set required for the task.

So for example, if I need a haircut I will go to a hairdresser. If I need a hug, I will potentially go to a family member or a close friend. Why, because my friend may give me a disastrous hairstyle and my behaviour towards my hairdresser may be deemed totally inappropriate. Of course, unless my friend was a hairdresser.

Often in life, our natural supports are offered by people we know well, who care about us. We generally do not pay for those supports. We also get other supports in our lives that we are required to pay for. Then sometimes we blend the supports. For example,

- If I need advice, I may go and chat with a friend and/or go to seek the advice of a solicitor if the matter required professional input.
- If I wanted to develop a new hobby or skill, I may ask a friend who has the expertise or knowledge or I may pay for formal support. For example, an art class.

> As a non-disabled person, I would not expect my friends or a paid support to offer everything to me. Including organising my day, my personal care, my money management, supporting me within the social context, making decisions for me and my life.

For many people who are labelled as having a disability, we find that the natural and paid supports often get blended into one.

Why does it become the role of staff to fulfill many roles in a person's life both paid; personal care, life trainer/teacher, employment coach, support worker, and also un-paid; confidant or pretend friend?

For a meaningful life, we need to distinguish between the two support roles for all citizens. People who are labeled as having a disability have the right to expect and experience both natural and paid support in their lives.

When we belong in our chosen communities, we experience a mixture of both paid/formal supports and informal/natural supports. People who are labelled as having a disability have the right to participate and contribute to their chosen community. To do so we need to think about a community-led approach rather than a service-led traditional approach.

People not systems keep us safe!

By separating the paid and unpaid supports we need in life, we gain a better understanding of what supports we need to pay for. What supports are already around us and how to nurture these freely given relationships.

"We cant just make a relationship happen, but what we can make happen is to design a situation which I call context, a situation in which a relationship is more likely to arise".

Janet Klees

Janet's Klees; Attention to the following 5:

- **Person**
- **Place**
- **Presence**
- **Role**
- **People**

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Clarity around paid and unpaid roles and distinguishing characteristics of each.

Through building our relationships with others, we begin to belong to our community.

PAID SUPPORTS

- Financial payment is required.
- Helpful when specific to a purpose or a need.
- Unhelpful when it becomes a barrier to us developing freely given relationships.
- Formal staff often leave our lives, the relationship is often fleeting while the loss to us is great.
- We receive the input mostly, based on our medical/professional defined needs.
- It can place us only in the role of the client.
- With only paid support, we may never live a meaningful life within our own communities.
- Paid supports can protect us or keep us safe.

UN- PAID SUPPORTS

- It is freely given.
- It is a mutual relationship based on shared interests, values, or community living.
- Freely given relationships offer much longer-lasting supports within our lives.
- We share lives, needs, growth, and care for each other.
- We gain positive social roles; friend, neighbour, community member etc.
- People who know and care about us keep us safe.

Recruitment Process

So before we begin the recruitment process we need to ask.... **What is the true purpose of our paid supports?**

What is helpful to us

When the support person:

- is **chosen** by us.
- matches our family **values, culture, and traditions.**
- **Earns their seat at our table by listening first, to gain our trust.**
- **honours** our voice and **respects the natural authority** of us and our family.
- **sees past** our label of disability.
- is able to offer supports in a **flexible tailored** way that best suits us.
- supports us to gain **positive social roles** within our lives.
- has the highest **respect** for us and our family.
- has the highest **expectation** for us.
- is able to **grow** and **learn** with us.
- supports us to gain **freely given relationships** within our community.

When the support person skills include: deep respectful listening, creativity in how they offer us support, positive problem-solving abilities, excellent planning skills, reflective practice within their work, ability to have fun, and be courageous.

When the paid support can walk alongside us and our family supporting our journey.

Recruitment Process

So before we begin the recruitment process we need to ask.... **What do you not need or want from your support person.**

What is un helpful to us

When the support person:

- is **not chosen** by us and we recruit in desperation or settle out of need.
- **clashes** with our family values, culture, and traditions.
- **When the person arrives into our lives as the expert, unable to listen, hear, or see us.**
- **replaces** other freely given supports and potential relationships by being a dominant paid support.
- offers support based on **their needs and wants.**
- can only see our disability; **us as less than** or in negative roles such as a client, burden, broken.
- does not understand the **need for respect**.
- has been **institutionalised** by traditional service concepts, or their approach is based on the medical model of care only.
- is unable to imagine, vision, or believe in supporting us to live an ordinary life of meaning within your chosen community.

When the support person lacks the ability to: Listen, learn, grow, admit when they are wrong, take positive risks, and or believe in our right to live a meaningful life.

Finding the right support person for you and your family

It can be hard during the recruitment process to choose the right person. Like any skill, it gets easier as you gain experience in doing it. However, there is no magical formula and it can be a challenge to secure the right match between you and your staff. Sometimes even with the best intentions, it doesn't work out for either you or them.

The process can also at times be confusing, and we can experience a lot of anxiety and worry about making the right choice. Sometimes we try to recruit the person who we think is an all-rounder, someone who can do everything. Hoping or expecting anyone to do everything is not sustainable in the long term. It is too much to expect of one person. Many people have worked on the question of recruitment and how to find the person who is the best match.

Building Blocks for a Robust Recruitment

The recruitment process needs to be extremely detailed. You and those around you need to identify clearly the areas in your life you need support with. You need to ask and think carefully about what qualities a person would need to have to be a good match for you and your family.

- To help answer these questions you need to think about and be clear about who you are including;
- likes, dislikes, needs, will & preference
- interests and potential areas of exploration
- strengths and vulnerabilities
- your culture, family & personal beliefs
- your unique personality

It is also vital that when recruiting you also take into consideration:

- Your support needs and the amount of support time that works for you.
- What area/aspect of your life, interest, and passions do you want support to develop?
- What social roles in your community do you want to grow? Neighbour, friend, employee, volunteer.
- What skills, gifts and abilities will the potential staff member bring to enhance your life?

"Having paid support in our life is like a dance; we start off as the lead partner, nervous and unsure. Once trust is gained, the tempo changes, sometimes we lead and sometimes we follow. We can relax, be brave in our steps forward, and enjoy the pleasure of the partnership and the dance of life itself". *ILN Family Voice*

Reflections from the Irish lived experience

Recruitment can be laborious, challenging, even painful at times. Mistakes are costly especially to the person and those closest to them. However, when it works as in when our supports enhance our life and match with our values and family culture, something magical happens.

Recruitment is not only about hiring formal or paid staff but it also takes into consideration informal supports. How we can be supported to build freely given relationships in our lives and in our community.

As a family, here are some of our reflections from our journey over the past five years.

Our experience, as a family-led personalised budget-funded arrangement, has enabled us to develop a description of three different styles of potential support staff we have encountered on our journey.

THE NATURAL

This candidate has demonstrated during and through the recruitment process a natural understanding of how best to support you to live a meaningful life. It may not have been apparent from their C.V. or previous experience however through the interviews you will have gained a sense that this candidate meets the criteria. That with the right conditions this person will flourish in the support role, adding real value to your life.

3 styles of potential staff

This candidate can come from any profession or background including a social care background. It is therefore important to keep an open mind when shortlisting candidates. At the centre, of the process must be you, your values, family culture, and your dreams to ensure you find what you are looking for.

THE GROWER

This candidate may not meet all of the criteria or maybe lacking in certain areas. However, through the recruitment process, you have gained a real sense that with the right amount of coaching and input, this candidate could grow and develop in the role. That in time they could potentially be a great addition to your life. This candidate may be limited in experience or may lack confidence. When employing this person it is important to be clear about what supports they may require to develop the required skills. Very clear instruction and communication are helpful here.

3 styles of potential staff

THE WILDFLOWER

This candidate does not meet all of the criteria. They may not have any real experience, and yet something has shown through the recruitment process that encourages you that they may be a great addition to you and your life. With this candidate, they can often flourish within the arrangement or self-select out of the role quite quickly. They can also be a high cost to you and your family. With this support person, the process may take your energy, time, support, and lots of coaching to develop the required skill set. It is important that there is real clarity around the potential you see in this candidate and understanding the potential cost in supporting them to develop their role as your direct support staff member.

"Families are people's most durable support. Enduring bonds among people, not law, delineate a wonderful variety of family forms. Family love energizes and shapes development and nurtures desire for a good life. Family knowledge and heritage forms identity. Family resourcefulness buffer crises, and provides long term assistance. Family networks open opportunities, family commitment supports educational, economic, and civic involvement. "

John O'Brien and Beth Mount, Pathfinders, Inclusion Press, Pge 113.

What we say YES to!!

- Know what the ask is....?
- Be really clear and specific on what supports and the type of person you are looking for.
- Understand what you what to achieve and can develop with paid support.
- Understand and be clear about your red line for saying no.
- Look for local individuals, based within your community or have knowledge of local life.
- If it is to support a specific role, then it may be a range of people who you see regularly for different lengths of time within your community. A neighbour going to church or choir, A singer to support your singing, a baker to support you to develop your baking for the choir rehearsals etc.
- The role of paid staff should always be to support you develop freely given relationships around your interests.
- Paid support should be at your side not behind you pushing their agenda or in front of you blocking you from others
- Break down the recruitment process into stages that will work for you.
- Offer them a trial period, build in lots of time to reflect on how they are doing.

Communication is Key. Be honest and open always, to yourself and those around you. Be reflective on what is working and not. Listen to your gut and follow your instincts. Don't lose your sense of humor, laughter is often the best medicine !!!

What we say no to!!!

- Don’t rush into the process, or recruit when in crisis.
- Avoid listening to the ongoing narrative... *"that it is impossible to recruit, as people want to work in large organisations"*. You are recruiting support to lead a meaningful life within your community, stay true to your vision.
- Don’t try to find staff who is a "doer of everything and master of none".
- Avoid limiting recruiting in the traditional way or only looking at the candidates with social care training and background.
- Avoid recruiting staff who even unconsciously will be a barrier for you developing new relationships.

Remember you can teach them how best to support you and what you need. However, you can’t teach them respect, the ability to listen, or how to show empathy.

- Ensure paid support understands the boundaries of their role... "what is theirs to do and what is not".
- Lack of regular clear communication is very unhelpful. it is essential for honest, respectful communication and consistent engagement.
- Remember the actions of others towards us speak louder than false words.
- Don’t rush into contracts as they are binding.

> Do not dis-honour your truth, because you fear it will cause upset.
> Do not be afraid to lose bad staff if they are not working out.
> No staff is better than bad staff !!!!!

Final Reflections

If paid supports can only offer us a traditional model of care, then we will be forever seen only as a client or disabled person. We will be forever waiting to begin our lives within our chosen communities. We will be forever a visitor or observer as we watch others around us live a real life.
Sadly when we place all our energies in recruiting only paid support, we are forever living a life of people leaving and coming into our lives, a lonely life where we are continuously limited by our label of needs.

So the message is simple.
We may all need paid support in our lives, some of us may need more than others. However, we all need freely given relationships, some of us may need support to build and sustain these. But we all need the opportunity to offer our gifts and time to others within our community. We all deserve to belong and to be loved.

"Having a personalised budget has allowed choice and control for our family, a recruitment process centers around us. We now as a family see a person truly emerging, someone was once hidden away by the restrictions of the traditional system. It is not always the easiest of pathways, but for us, it is the only one to a life of meaning and belonging."

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