

Understanding the role of the broker

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It is probably inevitable that, when a truly innovative and potent idea first emerges, people will try to understand it in terms that are already familiar to them. As a result, the essence often gets lost, and the idea becomes downgraded to nothing more than a new variation on an old theme.

This evidently appears to be the case with service brokerage. Much has been written about this role within Individualized Funding systems during the past decade. Brokerage is regarded by many as a critical system component that promises to assist people with disabilities in the process of identifying their needs and accessing appropriate community supports in order to achieve an ordinary life in the community. Brokerage is also an important feature of the various Robert Wood Johnson self-determination projects now underway throughout the USA. Unfortunately, there is a significant degree of confusion within these projects about exactly what this new role is, and how it is intended to operate.

In practice, brokerage in many US state operates more as a form of case management, or as a technical version of advocacy. In our view, both of these approaches reflect misunderstanding of brokerage. Tom Nerney (2000) has estimated that approximately 80% of brokerage is conducted within government or service provider agencies. (There is also a number of jurisdictions in which brokers act as independent consultants.) This situation is a very dangerous development for a number of reasons. First, planning conducted within these contexts cannot escape the fact that it represents a conflict of interest. It is impossible for the broker, who is supposedly there to assist the person with a disability to identify and access needed supports, not to be influenced by other organizational demands. In such situations, the broker risks becoming a “gate-keeper” or “rationer”, directing people to resources that are not necessarily most appropriate. Second, to the extent that this type of planning support loses the confidence of consumers and families, there is a danger that brokerage will be viewed as ineffective, and indeed nothing more than case management masquerading under a new name.

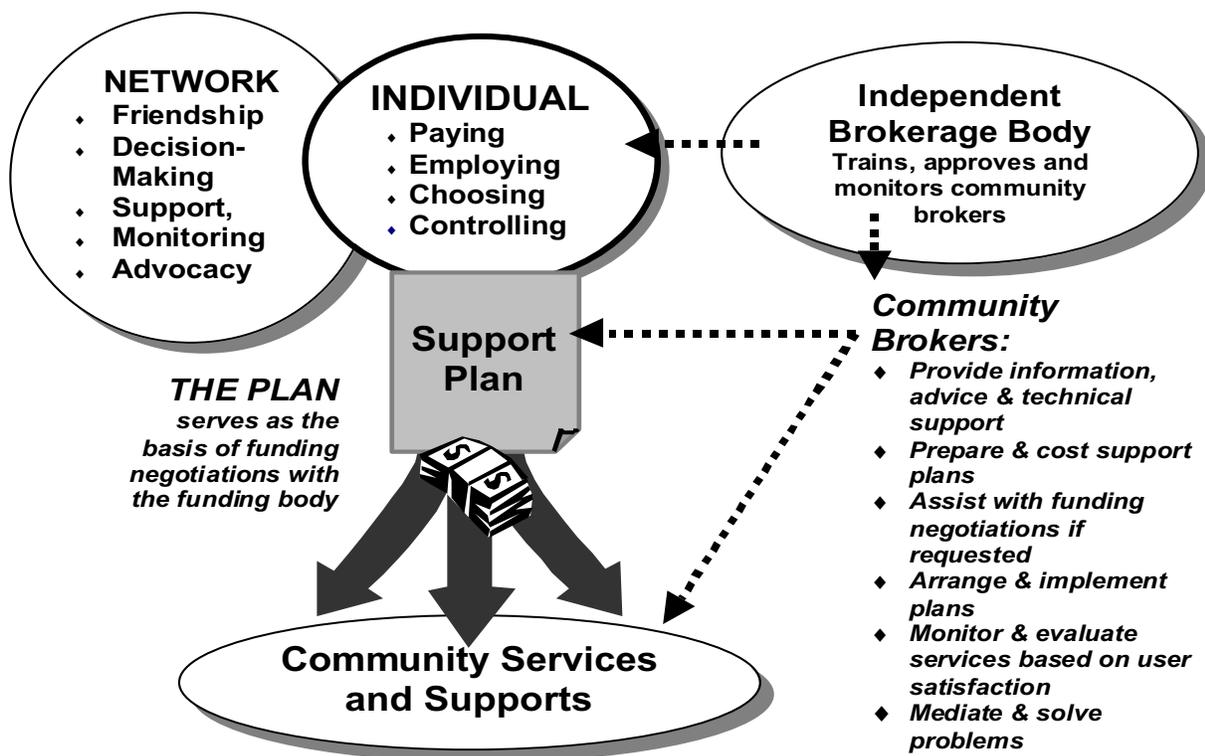
Back to the beginnings of brokerage

These versions have lost the essential principles and features of the role which were so important to the people who first envisioned it. It was parents of children with developmental disabilities in British Columbia in 1976 that first thought about the need for independent planning support. In thinking about how best to assist their family members to return from a large institution to live in the community, one of the things they identified (in addition

to individualized funding,) was the need for a place to go in the community where they could get professional, technical planning assistance. They recognized that access to information and technical support was critical – in short, they understood that individualized funding alone was insufficient to empower them to be effective decision makers.

In speaking with some of these parents, it is clear that initially they were more concerned about a place to go than the need for individual brokers. They wanted an organization in which they could place their trust that they were getting accurate information and appropriate support. They recognized that such an entity could not be within government, or a service agency, as this would represent a serious conflict of interest. Additionally, they were concerned that without a community-based body that was controlled by people with disabilities and their allies, anyone playing a planning role could easily impose their own ideas and values on the person seeking support. So, parents envisioned an advisory (rather than decision-making) body, which they referred to as a “fixed point of responsibility”, that was mandated to respond to and work on behalf of people with disabilities (and their networks).

The position of the broker in an individualized funding system:



It was only after they were clear on these ideas that parents began thinking further about how best to deliver the various supports they and their family members would require. These included:

- advice and information;
- assistance in reviewing and clarifying her needs/expectations;

- developing personal plans;
- negotiating individualized funding;
- locating, arranging, monitoring and evaluating community services & resources;
- resolving & mediating problems;
- stimulating the development of new services and helping to modify existing ones.

Hence the idea of a broker - as the technical extension of a community body - emerged out of this thinking. Specifically, parents looked to the business community and saw that a broker was a professional that people went to for financial advice, but who would not (or should not) impose his/her ideas. Parents very much wanted the broker to be actively engaged in the planning process: providing advice, critiquing their plans and helping them to understand the implications of any potential decisions, but not dictating the kinds of decisions they should make. Families envisioned that the broker would adopt various roles and strategies to help them navigate what was to them was a complex and difficult system.

Combining accountability with choice

In our view, a community body that is controlled by people with disabilities and family members is an essential component in any attempt to reform and alter the balance of power within the current system. Indeed, there is a danger that other “forms” of brokerage, and in particular the sole reliance on “fee for service” brokerage (which is really tantamount to independent professional consultants) will be fraught with all kinds of problems. Many readers will be all too familiar with the control exerted by professionals, and we are certain that this kind of brokerage could show the same unwanted tendencies.

A community brokerage body could, however, be part of a mixed approach to brokerage. For example, such a body could play a variety of important roles, including:

- training, vetting and monitoring independent community brokers;
- maintaining a list of approved, independent community brokers from which consumers could choose (this body could also assist consumers to know what to expect from these independent brokers);
- maintaining a database of information on such things as relevant laws and public policies, cost and reputation of local services, etc. – such a database could, in fact, help to reduce the need for direct brokerage involvement;
- providing training to service agency training;
- addressing local community development needs, including assisting consumers to establish needed services and supports;
- collecting data about the nature and operation of community and generic services and feeding this information to appropriate bodies.

Many observers have talked about the need for independence, and we agree with this entirely. However, without a community body (as one source of brokerage assistance which families and individuals can choose), that has responsibility to ensure that brokers are trained, vetted and monitored, the “state” is likely to establish the parameters of this critical role. If anyone should be the “keeper of the keys” on how brokers should operate,

surely it should be the people most affected. A community brokerage body that people with disabilities control and run could certainly help to achieve this. There is also the need to ensure that an actual planning infrastructure exists in any given community. Relying solely on the market, through private brokers, will not necessarily ensure that the needed community planning supports will be developed and effectively maintained over time.

A skilled role

In addition to independence being fundamental to the service brokerage role, another characteristic of brokerage which often seems to be misunderstood is that it is a technical role which requires people to have special skills in several areas. Just as misunderstanding about the need for independence often reflects a failure to distinguish between brokerage and case management, so this misunderstanding about skill requirements may reflect a failure to distinguish between the brokerage role and citizen advocacy - leading to the assumption that it's enough to be a 'right-thinking' person with ordinary life skills.

Of course, there may be people who just happen to have the required combination of skills, but it will be unusual, and certainly cannot be assumed. So that implies that people almost certainly will need some training, and definitely do need some form of assessment and accreditation.

There is something of a conundrum with regards to finding people with the potential to take on this skilled role. Professionals who have worked as case managers, or in similar roles, are likely to have skills in several of the required areas, as well as a valuable insider's knowledge of how the system works. But to become effective brokers they will probably have to do quite a lot of re-thinking, and dump some professional allegiances. Here again, it would be wrong to assume that they can't make that adjustment, but equally wrong to assume that they can and will. For this reason, and to ensure that they really do have the required skills, they will need help in the form of technical training, plus a system of accreditation which tests whether or not they have managed to make the adjustments. People who have worked in support agencies may also have a very relevant set of foundation skills, but they too will need additional skills, and may bring some unhelpful 'baggage'. As far as we are aware, there are no other identifiable sources of people who are likely to have acquired the required skills and values, but other people whose professional or life experiences have given them the necessary values and commitment should also have access to a training and accreditation process.

An additional mistaken assumption is that brokers deliver a fixed, standardized service for each person they assist. It is especially important to see the role more flexibly when brokers are extending their services to people who have physical but not intellectual impairments. Logic, plus experience from Independent Living projects in the USA and elsewhere (including Direct Payments in the United Kingdom) suggest that people with physical impairments are less likely (and this is of course a generalization, with exceptions on either side) to require help in identifying their dreams and figuring out what kinds of support are required to make those dreams possible. In these circumstances, the emphasis of the broker's role will be on the practical end of the process: gathering information about resources and legalities (such as the responsibilities of people who employ assistants), planning, and co-ordination. And of course some people may prefer, and have the ability, also to complete those tasks for themselves - in which case they don't need to have a broker, and should not be forced to have one.

In our view, the broker requires a high level of skills in a variety of areas. These primarily include:

- appropriate values;
- possession of a clear vision of the capacity of people with developmental disabilities to live fulfilling lives as citizens;
- highly developed interpersonal communication skills;
- an understanding of the concept of the 'circle of support' and its relevance, as well as the ability to recognize the kinds of people who might appropriately be involved in the circle;
- a strong understanding of the principles, structure, and functions of an IF system;
- a solid understanding of the principles and necessary logic of the individual planning process;
- an ability to work systematically in collecting information about specific resources;
- knowledge of the kinds of organization which may be relevant;
- an ability to act in a group in ways which are facilitative;
- an ability to document the planning process and its outcomes in ways which are precise yet also support vitality and imagination;
- budget negotiation, service contracting, monitoring, problem-resolution and mediation skills;
- awareness of the role of 'supporter' and ability to work within this role.

A distinct role offers a special opportunity

Service brokerage is a complex and demanding role, and requires the broker to accept the idea that professional 'power' can only result from effectively empowering and enhancing the status of others. If brokerage is to be effective it must be recognized as distinct from both case management and advocacy; and it must be correctly positioned within Individualized Funding systems as a role that is accorded legitimacy by the other actors in the system. On the other hand, we do understand the look of wistful longing that we sometimes notice on the faces of case managers when we explain the brokerage role. They have realized, correctly, that to be a service broker is an opportunity to work in the community, free from conflicts of interest and the burden of gate-keeping, and with the single concern to enable people to find all the richness of living which comes with true citizenship.

Steve Dowson and Brian Salisbury are principals in Emprise International Training and Consultancy (<http://www.emprise-international.com>). Emprise is a partnership that assists and promotes the policies, systems, and support services (including service brokerage) required to enable citizens with intellectual impairments and/or other disabilities to achieve self-determination and community inclusion. Emprise works with government, service providers, and with agencies providing technical support services, to help them to define their new roles and develop skills the skills they require.

References

Tom Nerney, Opening Plenary Remarks, Self-Determination Conference, Buelton, California, June 1, 2000.