

“From Crisis to New Opportunities”: Coping with COVID-19 in the World of Work, for Employees with IDD Supported by Israel Elwyn

The global COVID-19 crisis caused more than a million Israeli employees to lose their jobs or be furloughed. Somewhat ironically, COVID-19 and its consequences was an “equal opportunity” disease for all employees in Israel, including ones with disabilities, who were in the front line of losing their jobs or being furloughed. While the state of Israel established emergency regulations supporting many Israeli employees with unemployment benefits, many employees with disabilities faced challenges in guaranteeing their disability related rights, such as disability pension, under the new regulations. This required a joint discussion and action forum of the employees and Government representatives along with those NGO’s supporting employees with disabilities working in the competitive job market.

Founded in 1984, Israel Elwyn (IE) is the largest nonprofit provider of programs for individuals with disabilities in Israel, serving over 5,100 children and adults each year throughout the country. IE programs span the life spectrum from infants to senior citizens, offering early intervention, youth transition to adulthood, job training, supported employment, supported living, and retiree services, as well as providing self-advocacy groups and training, and professional development. IE’s vision foresees a society in which people with disabilities will be citizens with equal rights; a society in which we all aspire to determine our own future and way of life. Our mission is to develop and provide a wide array of supports, means of accessibility and tools for people with disabilities, while constantly striving for excellence of service and the creation of a just society.



Israel Elwyn’s Job Placement Services provide on-the-job support for 1,200 individuals with disabilities nationwide in the competitive job market and assist in finding them meaningful employment while removing barriers to inclusion in the workforce. Additionally, IE has developed pre-employment and vocational training courses, such as a chef’s assistant course, a preschool assistants’ aide course, and computer and language skills courses, in collaboration with academic and professional institutions, in order to maximize career achievement and wage levels.



Prior the COVID-19 crisis, 1,100 employees with Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD) were working in various workplaces, supported by Israel Elwyn's Job Placement professionals, yet, staff conducted a survey process and found that, since the Israeli economy gradually began functioning again in the beginning of June, many of them had been furloughed or let go, and this required adapting the program to support and prepare employers and employees with IDD who were furloughed, fired or in a training process, to a new world of work coping with COVID-19.

When the COVID-19 crisis began and impacted Israel's economy, IE staff immediately sent personal questionnaires to these supported employees, to map their need for distance learning or work, and to identify key issues and challenges with which they were dealing during that period. The employees' initial and ongoing feedback, which was transmitted via online one-on-one and/or group discussions, enabled IE staff to adapt the program's content and methods to changing needs. In addition, IE's staff connected employees to local social services as needed.

Israel Elwyn's staff focused on three levels:

1. Individual level: Situational assessing for and supporting of: a) Furloughed employees alongside their employers, to maintain work skills and workplaces, while guaranteeing the rights of both; b) Laid-off employees and those in employment training processes, by adjusting the program, identifying trends in the new world of work with COVID-19, and holding additional existing and new vocational training courses, focusing on the competitive job market.
2. On the employer level: IE's staff supported and guided employers regarding fulfilling the rights of those employees with IDD who are still employed, while instructing active employees in preventing virus spread and verifying available jobs during and after the crisis.
3. On the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services' level: Direct contact was made for discussing challenges and dilemmas and for a joint brainstorming and action process with ongoing feedback about dealing with the unique challenges faced by employees with IDD during the crisis.

IE professionals immediately turned the COVID-19 crisis into new opportunities using a "Crisis Management" model, as part of its commitment to prevent the referral of hundreds of employees with IDD to sheltered workshops. IE made use of its unique and professional specialists in marketing, public relations, IT, and therapies (Occupational, Physical, etc.), while learning about the changes in the various workplace environments.

Along with the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services, IE facilitated online support and training for maintaining and acquiring work, language, and computer skills; new trends of requirements for vocational training were identified and facilitated and existing training programs were adapted and extended.

The Israeli government is supporting IE and other organizations that provide supported employment services to adapt their supports and training to the evolving world of work alongside COVID-19. Globally, maintaining and acquiring work, computer, and language skills online, is more relevant today than ever for people with IDD and others with similar needs for support.

Our main goals today are:

- Promoting policy changes regarding employers' incentives, such as grants for re-employing furloughed employees with IDD
- Promoting cognitive linguistically accessible vocational courses in the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services, for people with IDD
- Facilitating additional supports and adaptations for the inclusion of people with IDD in the competitive job market, while taking cultural needs of the different sectors into consideration

The staff of the Supported Employment Program in all four of our regional branches is busier now than ever, with the return to work of hundreds of employees with a disability who had been furloughed or fired. Our relationship with employers is more significant now than ever before. As an example of this, Rami Sar-Shalom, CEO of the Peamit Company, who for over 18 years employed workers with a disability in his chain of stores shares:

“The relationship with Israel Elwyn is a longstanding relationship of partnership and support for our most special employees, in as part of their full inclusion in the community. This kind of Inclusion leads to doing good together. Good for the employees and good for Peamit and its staff members, which adds a heart and soul to our daily activities.

With return to our stores and facilities following the Corona crisis, one of our first and most important decisions was how to bring the group of workers in Peamit's packaging department back to work and to routine after a period of mandatory vacation and how to bring them back to a work and activity routine while maintaining all the [social distancing] rules.

We are happy about it, because coming back without our heart and soul just doesn't do it...”

Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19 and no less of being furloughed, all the Peamit Company's employees have now returned to their workplace, where they maintain safety regulations according to “purple tag” standards. The group of employees with IDD working at their logistics center in Bet Shemesh is currently celebrating three years of employment, supported by Israel Elwyn's Job Placement Program's staff.



During the past three months, staff of IE's Academy for Continuing Education worked intensively with representatives of the various programs in order to establish a system of online instruction with varying content, for the benefit of service recipients and staff members.

Great efforts have been invested in transforming materials from the supported employment workshops from being face-to-face to virtual. The materials are available in both Arabic and Hebrew (some are accessible in sign language), on the following topics:

- Tools and skills for coping with stressful situations and uncertainty
- Looking for work in this new era
- Processing difficult situations at work during the coronavirus crisis
- Preparation for the world of work
- The significance of work in a person's life
- Instruction – online work (using Zoom)
- Rights at the workplace – related to salary, benefits, etc.
- Emphases in preparing to return to a work routine
- Employers' expectations in the world of work
- Preparation for a job interview
- Personal safety and security during the coronavirus period
- Mutual assistance (“to help and be helped”) as an important social skill.

In addition, several informative ZOOM meetings were held with parents of service recipients participating in the Supported Employment Program as well as the “Creating a Future” and “Mosaic – National Service for Everyone” transitional programs for youth. These virtual meetings enabled the participation of many parents who had previously been unable to physically come and participate in meetings. The meeting on the topic of fulfillment of rights and opportunities in the working world and in continuing education programs, was held for parents of Mosaic participants who have completed their year of service, and was “attended” by 60 (!) parents. This was an excellent opportunity for them to better understand the program's contents, to meet staff members, and to ask questions. Once again, we see that some of the technological approaches that have developed from the COVID-19 crisis will surely continue to be used extensively when things truly get back to normal.

