

FEATURE ARTICLE

COMMUNITY INTEGRATION An Evolutionary Process

The survival of any species is dependent upon the deviancy of its membership. The greater the deviancy, the greater the ability to survive extreme conditions. If we were to plot survival on a graph we would create a bell curve. The majority of individuals would be grouped in the middle and would survive best in ideal conditions. Some individuals would be skewed to the far right or far left. These most deviant individuals are the individuals that would flourish in extreme conditions, while all others would perish. It would then become the responsibility of these survivors to repopulate.

Despite this very basic principle of demographics, we would tend to overlook the value of individuals with mental handicaps in our society. As recent as the early 1950's, doctors were advising that all children born with mental handicaps be placed in institutions. The expectation was that the child would never be capable of learning even the most basic self-help skills and would be a tremendous burden to the family. What was needed was an enriching supportive environment, but instead a sterile, impoverished environment was the order of the day. Keep in mind that we are all, to a large degree, products of our environment.

Fortunately, some parents rejected the advice of the professionals and chose to have their children grow up as part of the family. Parents in the Grande Prairie area wanted their children to receive an education and lobbied for the construction of the Peace School of Hope in 1959. By 1973, these children had moved into adulthood and Swan Industries was created to supply sheltered employment in the Grande Prairie area.

The original program at Swan Industries was outcome orientated that is individuals were not expected to graduate from the program. In the late 1970's, focus shifted to "Vocational Training". Vocational training prepares individuals for integration into competitive employment through the acquisition of basic work competencies. Training occurs within an industrial model.

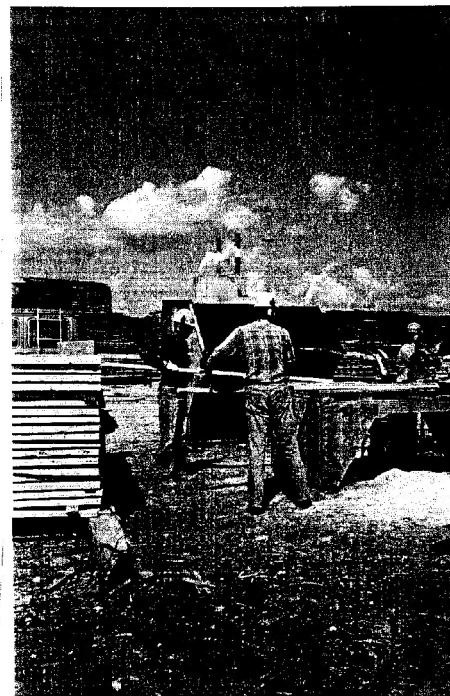
In order to create industrial model, Swan began to operate a business. Pallet contracts were obtained from Dow Chemical, AGT, Horne and Pitfield, and numerous local companies. In the fall of 1980, the Bottle Depot was purchased. Recent acquisitions include a rig sawdust operation and the Daisy Fresh Diaper Service.

Swan Industries' image changed with this shift in emphasis. Trainees are now viewed as valued producers of goods and/or services. We are often asked to submit bids on a wide variety of jobs. Salesmen routinely compete to become our suppliers. These are very good indicators of our value within the community.



FAST EDDIES

K.P.+G.



It is ironic that our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness. The community continues to focus on Swan Industries as the place for the mentally handicapped to work in our community. Why should their businesses supply jobs for the mentally handicapped when the need has been adequately filled? Although trainees have been prepared to work in the community, has the community been prepared to accept our graduates into employment?

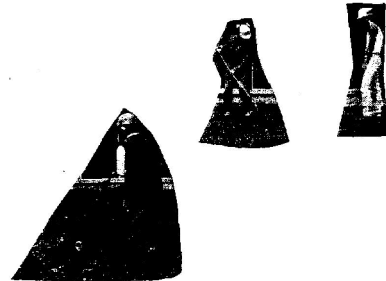
Swan Industries must create community based alternatives in order to remove the focus from our facility. Alternatives should include work experience, supported employment and competitive employment. Work experience will allow an individual to sample a variety of work environments and thereby enable the individual to make better informed choices. Supported employment will allow individuals to work even if they cannot produce at a competitive rate. Competitive employment will exist only for individuals capable of producing at a rate that will satisfy their employers.

We have presently been testing the waters with the help of some temporary funding through the S.T.E.P. and S.E.E.D. programs. Jobsites have been established at Procter and Gamble and Fast Eddies Lube and Car Wash. A lawn maintenance contract has also been obtained from A.M.A.C.. Negotiations are currently underway to secure department funding for the operation of a community based alternatives program on a full time basis.

Once options are made available who will control the options, the service provider or the consumer? Will individuals be kept behind to satisfy contractual needs? Will individuals be pushed out even if they don't wish to leave? Will entrance and exit criterias control outcomes? Will individuals control their own outcomes through personal planning?

The keys to passages into our community are within our reach.

Joe Gannon
Vocational Manager



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