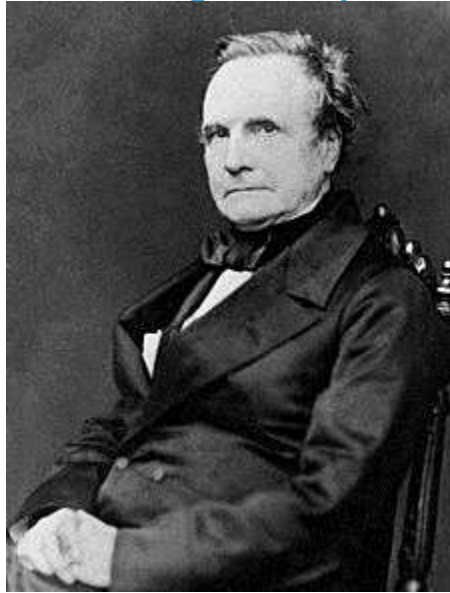


Ending Disability Segregation

Job Customization and the Babbage Principle: It's Nothing New



Charles Babbage was an inventor who in the mid-1800s first came up with the idea of a programmable computer. His design actually worked when a museum finally assembled it in 1991. He also was accomplished in math and economics, and he described what is now called the Babbage principle, which focuses on the advantages of the division of labor. Babbage described how highly skilled workers, who are usually also more highly paid, often spend parts of their job doing tasks where their skills are not really needed.

This means an employer is paying for a skill not being used some of the time. He noted that divided labor is more efficient, because you can then reduce production costs by better matching each workers' skills with what needs to be done.

This should sound familiar to employment professionals who do **job carving or job customization**. Many more workers with disabilities can be employed if employers would more specifically match what they need getting done to their labor pool. From the employer point of view, this would be a more efficient, cost-effective way of using labor. From the disability perspective, it should allow a broader range of opportunities for employment.

But this approach is a radical departure from the way most businesses actually hire. More typically, employers look for job candidates with a broad skill set. And jobs are often defined as a fixed list of tasks for a position, forcing the worker to fit into all the perceived needed duties, regardless of skill, interests, or whether its the best use of his or her time, all done at one set salary level. And because this is the standard business model, it requires convincing employers about the benefits of customizing jobs to individual talents. This thus becomes a marketing challenge.

Job customization using the Babbage Principle minimizes the need for job seekers with disabilities to compete with non-disabled workers who have a broader range of skills and experiences. Instead, candidates with disabilities are analyzed by their ability to get a task or sets of tasks done at a cost. And because they are pre-screened by disability employment providers (that is, if they have done career planning and "discovery" well), there is an added benefit. Again, job development and marketing must evolve to focus on this strength that disability employment providers can offer.

An important note - safeguards that must be in place to ensure that workers with disabilities involved with

job customization are not relegated to low-paying tasks only or placed in drudgery work. People with disabilities are often subject to mistaken perceptions, and the Babbage Principle could be misused to set up a new "class" of workers doing low-skill work at low pay just for business efficiency. So customized employment must always be careful in how this principle is applied, or risk further marginalizing workers with disabilities.