

Customized Employment: A Strategy for Developing Inclusive Employment Opportunities

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Emily is going on a cruise to Mexico with money she earned herself. When she was 19 years old, she used the process of customized employment to find a job. She had transitioned out of high school at age 18 and initially spent her days assembling flashlights in a production line at a local developmental disability agency. Her family wanted to help Emily find employment that allowed her to use more of her skills and was located in an inclusive setting in the community.

The concept of customized employment was introduced in 2001 by the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. The strategy was designed to assist people with disabilities and other individuals who have potential barriers to employment, such as senior citizens, veterans, and people with complex health-related conditions. Customized employment is defined as,

... a means of individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the person with the disability, and is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer. It may include employment developed through job carving, self-employment, or entrepreneurial initiatives, or other job development or restructuring strategies that result in job responsibilities being customized and individually negotiated to fit the needs of the individuals with a disability. Customized employment assumes the provision of reasonable accommodations and supports necessary for the individual to perform the functions of a job that is individually negotiated and developed (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002, p. 43156).

For individuals with significant disabilities, the creation of a customized job increases "the opportunities for their participation and maximizes their competent performance" (Callahan, 2002). The principles and characteristics of customized employment are related to the concept of supported employment but are different in significant ways. A customized approach is initially guided by a job seeker's profile. Getting to know the job seeker at the beginning of the process is the key to developing a job that meets the needs of both the individual and the employer. In contrast, the typical supported employment approach is primarily driven by the jobs that are available in a community. Additionally, customized employment does not include group placements or subminimum wage positions as is often the case with supported employment (Inge, 2006). A customized employment approach leads to the development of a job based on the needs of the focus person rather than the labor market at large.

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The Customized Employment Process

The process of customizing a job starts with the development of an employment plan for a job seeker based on his or her strengths, interests, and complexities. Information gathered during this phase is more detailed than that obtained from a typical vocational assessment. One method of capturing the necessary detail is a process referred to as *discovery* (Callahan & Condon, 2007). Discovery seeks to answer the question "Who is this person?" by observing and talking to the individual in a variety of familiar and unfamiliar settings and by interviewing family members, friends, and service providers to get their perspectives on the strengths, contributions, performance, and needs of the job seeker.

The goal of the process is an understanding of the job seeker as an individual and the conditions that are necessary for the person to be successful in an employment setting. This includes not only the identification of an individual's preferences, interests, and contributions, but an understanding of "the complex issues that might emerge to compromise employment efforts" (Callahan and Condon, 2007, p. 23). Factors such as an individual's motivation to work and ways of learning a task are critical pieces of information in the discovery process. Conducting this kind of intensive investigation takes time but is well worth the effort to achieve effective employment outcomes.

Once the information is collected, it is written into a vocational profile that is used to develop an employment plan. The plan also includes a prioritized list of targeted employers, generated by the

job seeker's team and based on the information collected in discovery.

The information in the profile can subsequently be used to develop a portfolio that presents the job seeker to potential employers. This strategic marketing tool uses photographs and text to describe the skills and contributions of the individual. It can be presented to an employer by the job seeker, by a job developer, or by another employment professional who has been involved with the individual during the discovery process. For individuals who are interested in self-employment, the profile can be used to develop a business plan that outlines the skills the individual will bring to a business and describes his or her required resources and supports.

The discovery process can also be used in school-based settings to guide transition planning, career exploration, and vocational preparation for middle- and high-school students. Using the tools of discovery, team members can prepare students with significant disabilities for transition by exploring their preferences and interests and the conditions that allow the students to perform at their best. The process can enable students to make more informed choices and to advocate for themselves at IEP and transition meetings. Beginning the discovery process while students are still in school gives teams the time to really get to know them. The information they collect helps students build needed skills for the future. School is an opportunity for students to acquire work experiences in school-based jobs, participate in volunteer work in the community, or explore self-employment options.

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Customizing a Job for Emily

Idaho Deaf-Blind Project staff, together with a consultant from the University of Montana's Rural Institute on Disabilities and NCDB, facilitated an initial meeting to discuss customized employment with Emily's family and service providers. They explained the discovery process and how the information generated for the vocational profile would be used to find a job for Emily. The participants in the meeting included Emily, members of her family, staff from the developmental disabilities agency (DDA), her service coordinator, and a representative from the local vocational rehabilitation (VR) office. At the conclusion of the meeting, several members of the team volunteered to conduct interviews and observe Emily in a variety of settings.

The team members began collecting information by spending time with Emily in her home and in the community. They watched her make her favorite Mexican chicken soup and then ate dinner with the family later in the day. They observed her on the computer as she looked up the balance in her checking account. They went with her to an arts and crafts supply store and observed how she maneuvered through the aisles and the types of support she needed to find items and pay for them. They interviewed her parents, sisters, and other family members about chores she did on a daily basis and how she acted in unfamiliar settings. They asked if she ever initiated tasks on her own and discovered that she would automatically hang up people's coats when they came for a visit and sit down to play with their children without being prompted. They visited Emily at a DDA workshop and talked to the staff. They observed her at a bowling alley where she bowled on a weekly basis. They also talked to Emily and former teachers to find out how she learned new skills and how she had performed on vocational tasks in high school.

After conducting in-depth interviews and observations, the team compiled information and wrote it into a vocational profile. They included not only information learned from observations and interviews, but also details such as her family structure and social networks, transportation options in the community, her performance on formal and informal work done at home and at school, her favorite activities, her involvement in structured community activities, her preferred holidays and family traditions, her recreational likes and dislikes, her sensory challenges, and her academic, communication, and social skills.

Through this process the team began to understand who Emily was and the kinds of jobs that she might like and do well in. They learned that she performed best when there was a structured, predictable routine. She liked to use checklists and written instructions. She learned from modeling, verbal instructions, repetition, and repeated practice. She was described by her teachers as "thorough" and as someone who "likes to complete a task." She liked to be busy and to be around people, although the teachers did not think that it was necessary for them to continually engage her. She liked to do things with her hands (e.g., multipiece puzzles, pen drawings, cooking, crafts) and loved to buy cookbooks.

The team also learned more about the supports Emily might need in a work setting. They found out that she was uncomfortable in loud, echoing environments and would leave a setting if the sound was bothering her. They discovered that Emily had hearing aids but had chosen not to wear them, that she did not see out of her left eye, and that she had issues with depth perception. It was important to ensure that a worksite did not require her to go down steps on a regular basis, climb a ladder, or navigate over uneven terrain without assistance. When using a computer screen, she needed contrasting print with limited glare. She could read 12-point type, but it was easier and much less taxing on her vision if the print was larger. The team also discovered that Emily learned best when she initially had a one-to-one support person who provided systematic instruction and repeated practice on a task. Once she was familiar with an environment and knew the particulars of a task, she could do it on her own with intermittent support.

All of the information in the vocational profile was used to develop Emily's employment plan. It described her ideal working conditions and the terms for negotiation with an employer. The conditions included: (a) a steady pace of work that would keep her busy; (b) routine steps for a job (several tasks within a job would be all right); (c) clear rules and expectations; (d) a work schedule of 3 to 4 days a week of up to 8 hours a day; (e) avoidance of an extremely loud environment. The plan also listed Emily's specific job skills and a list of employers whose businesses might have a need for the tasks she could perform and match her conditions for employment.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the team decided that it would be beneficial for Emily to develop a portfolio for marketing herself to employers. She then designed one as a pictorial

and written representation of her contributions and capabilities. It included a variety of photographs of her playing the piano, making soup, using the computer, filing papers, working at a grocery store, and using public transportation. It also listed her areas of interest, the characteristics of her strong work ethic, and job tasks she could perform (e.g., delivering items, stocking, taking inventory, making snacks, sorting mail). The last slide of the portfolio asked the question “Could your business benefit from having any of these tasks performed?”

Emily obtained a job at a local fabric store. The manager was looking for a person who could work several hours a week and perform various tasks. She wanted someone who was reliable, had a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude. Emily, with the support of a job developer from the DDA, used her portfolio to present information about her skills and interests to the manager. She was subsequently hired to work four days a week for two hours a day, folding cloth on bolsters and making sure that the bolsters were in the proper order. Even though Emily had a number of marketable skills, she still required support to help her learn the steps of the job and complete the tasks in a timely manner. The funding for a job coach for Emily came from VR dollars and was coordinated with staff from that agency.

Emily is now 24 years old and is still working in her community. She no longer works at the fabric store, but she has used her portfolio to secure jobs at other places, including a daycare center and a television station. She now works at Kentucky Fried Chicken doing “lobby work.” She “loves it” and was, in fact, the “VR Client for the Year” for her region of the state. She works 12:00 to 2:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, and receives intermittent support from a job coach. The job coach was funded by a scholarship until recently but is now being paid with Medicaid funds.

Many customized employment services are supported by a blend of multiple funding sources. The Social Security Administration’s work incentive programs, such as PASS (Plan for Achieving Self-Support) have been one way to fund transition planning and career development activities for high school students. PASS plans have funded a variety of supports including assessments, job coaching, job development, transportation, and equipment for people who are eligible. Other sources of funding include Medicaid waivers, developmental disability council funds, state VR initiatives, and Medicaid infrastructure grants.

Customized employment is a strategy that strives to highlight an individual’s qualifications and interests in an effort to negotiate a job that satisfies both the employer and the job seeker. Although service providers and families who use the customized approach will likely encounter many of the same challenges that occur with the use of more traditional job development methods, those who decide to use it will discover a more innovative, person-centered assessment and planning process. They will discover that customized employment helps them to “think outside the box” as they work to develop a job for a specific person in the community or generally to expand inclusive employment opportunities.

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Seattle’s Deaf-Blind Service Center: A New Vision

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The Deaf-Blind Service Center (DBSC) is a community-based agency in Seattle committed to assisting Deaf-Blind people to reach and maintain their highest possible quality of life and degree of personal autonomy. The focus and vision of DBSC have evolved over its 20 years of existence, and today we are closer than ever to the community we serve.