



CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT FAQs

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Customized Employment (CE) is being demonstrated in communities across the nation and numerous questions and concerns are being raised as this advanced employment strategy expands. The U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability and Employment Policy (ODEP) explains that: *“Customized employment means 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 a 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 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 (Federal Register, June 26, 2002, Vol. 67. No. 123 pp 43154 - 43149).

The principal hallmarks and activities of CE include:

- ✚ Identifying specific job duties or employer expectations that are negotiated with employers;
- ✚ Targeting individualized job goals to negotiate based on the needs, strengths, and interests of the employment seeker;
- ✚ Meeting the unique needs of the employment seeker and the discrete, emerging needs of the employer;
- ✚ Starting with the individual as the source of information for exploring potential employment options;
- ✚ Offering representation, as needed, for employment seekers to assist in negotiating with employers;
- ✚ Occurring in integrated, non-congregate environments in the community or in a business alongside people who do not have disabilities;

- ✚ Resulting in pay at at least the prevailing wage (no sub-minimum wages);
- ✚ Creating employment through self-employment and business ownership;
- ✚ Facilitating an amalgam of supports and funding sources that may include Workforce Investment (One-Stops/Career Centers), Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Medicaid, Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs), Schools, Social Security (SSA), families, and other partners coordinated in ways to meet the needs of the individual (Griffin & Hammis, 2005; Callahan, 2005; Condon, 2004)

Making Customized Employment work raises numerous questions, both unique and anticipated. The following is a sampling of the **Frequently Asked Questions** (FAQs) about CE, and some brief responses:

Is Customized Employment just a new name for Supported Employment?

As Mike Callahan of Employment for All suggests, CE “stands on the shoulders of supported employment.” CE is a refinement of supported employment, but varies in important ways. Supported Employment often, although in best-practice it should not, still reacts to the Labor Market. That is, the job search process is largely driven by what jobs are available, advertised, or easy to find in that community or region. In CE, the employment seeker’s profile is developed without consideration of what might be available for work in the community. In essence, the first step is getting to know the employment seeker without the prejudice of “appropriate work” or “realistic goals.” Once the person is known, then work can begin being explored, on the person’s terms. In other words, employment situations are sought that meet the needs of the individual, and a negotiation follows that melds the desires of the worker with those of the employer. The existence of a Labor Market mindset tends to drive the kinds of jobs sought for people with disabilities under a Supported Employment model, hence the high proportion of food service, custodial, and high turnover jobs. CE counteracts the impulse of filling available jobs and instead uses Discovery of the individual as the driving force in a *job creation* process, and seeks to create mutually beneficial employment relationships.

Supported Employment makes allowances for congregate or group settings such as Mobile Crews and Enclaves, where sub-minimum wages may be paid. CE is specifically individualized and accepts commensurate wages only, in integrated settings. CE also includes business ownership as an important employment option (Griffin & Hammis, 2003).

How does one get to know the employment seeker?

The most widely used process is called Discovery (Callahan, 2004; Condon, 2004; Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2005). Discovery is not planning, it is an assessment process that seeks to answer the questions “who is this person?” and “what are the ideal

conditions of employment?” The process most often starts at home, includes an inventory of the surrounding neighborhood (with transportation and natural supports an on-going employment and inclusion issue, it makes sense to look for interests, and subsequently, opportunities nearby), and expands to places where interests can be explored through informational interviews, paid work experiences, or engagement in social activities. One vital point to remember during Discovery is that the CE team, employment specialist, employment seeker, family member and whoever else is involved, is not looking for employment; the outcome should be a reflection of the complexity of all human lives. In other words, there should be multiple employment directions revealed, not a job description, but rather vocational interests and a revealing of skills, that are used to create employment in the community. For a more detailed discussion of Discovery visit <http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition> and <http://www.employmentforall.org>

Wouldn't a standardized Vocational Evaluation be more scientific than Discovery?

Standardized vocational evaluation has never been proven to predict employment success. Discovery replaces the predictive validity assertion of Voc Eval with the ecologically valid process of witnessing an individual's needs, skills, desires, interests, and contributions in real community environments. This approach is much more functional and therefore more cost effective than traditional approaches to assessment, which often screen people out of employment services instead of capturing their potential as workers and human beings.

Isn't Customized Employment too expensive?

CE is too new to have generated any definitive cost data. The question is a good one, but might be further refined by asking “too expensive for whom?” Approximately 74% of adults with developmental disabilities remain unemployed, served largely in sheltered work or non-work day programs operated across the country (Metzel, et al. in press). The unemployment rate for individuals with psychiatric disabilities is worse and estimated at close to 90%, even though individuals with psychiatric disabilities list their greatest need and desire as being employed (Drake, 2005; Bond, 1992). The tremendous expense of building over 5,000 day programs, segregated transportation systems, and associated services has not delivered gainful employment, adequate training for employment, or social inclusion. CE can be accomplished for those needing such an intensive approach by blending day program funding, VR and WIA supports, and/or SSA Work Incentives such as Plans for Achieving Self Support (PASS). Examples to date do not reveal extraordinary costs at all. In fact, it can be effectively demonstrated that using one year's typical day program funding can easily fund wage employment or business ownership for an individual with significant disabilities (Griffin, Brooks-Lane, Hammis & Crandell, in press).

For instance, the national average day program rate is approximately \$12,000. The average cost of a Supported Employment placement for Vocational Rehabilitation is just under \$5000. Using the entire \$12,000, just from day program, can likely cover the costs of Discovery, job development or small business start-up, and coaching. Even using a

couple thousand dollars a year for on-going supports (i.e., Extended Employment), the cost of employment is significantly less. For example, an individual enters a day program at a cost of \$12,000 per year. Outcomes data suggests this person will likely be there for 30 years or more. Assuming no increases in funding (highly unlikely), the taxpayer bill for this program is \$360,000, plus SSI payments in excess of \$208,440 (again assuming no increases and not including the cost of Medicaid). Using the CE approach, the cost scenario might be as much as \$12,000 for employment development services, plus \$2,000 a year in additional vocational supports, or \$70,000 over 30 years (these expenses will no doubt vary based on the complexity of support needs, competence of the trainers, and job match precision). At earnings of just \$6.00 per hour for 30 hours per week (the typical weekly enrollment hours for a day program), this person would be expected to earn \$9,360 per year, or \$280,800 over the next 30 years, plus conservatively figured, Social Security savings of over \$100,000. Even assuming the person changes jobs 3 or 4 times, CE is still less expensive.

Is Customized Employment about helping people find their Dream Job?

People with disabilities, just like everyone else, live complex lives. The more exposure we have to ideas, diverse environments, people, and activities, the more interests we develop. Believing that any one of us has only one dream job is quite limiting when careers are considered. We once worked with a young man and asked a question we should no longer be asking: “Tell us Bill, what’s your dream job?” He told us that he wanted to rewind video tapes at Blockbuster. That seems like a very limiting position; one that is likely isolated from other workers, is repetitious and boring, and which holds little potential for natural support development or career and skill advancement. In truth, this “Dream Job” was the result of the Job Developer asking this question of someone with limited life experiences (other than weekly outings to the movie theater), and it reflected the teaching skills of the agency’s personnel who could help someone master video rewinding but few tasks of more complexity. Following the Discovery process Bill revealed that he really aspired to be a movie director, and this opened up discussions about entertainment, acting, theatrical production, etc. Now there were many jobs open to Bill for exploration. Focusing in on a dream job is too limiting. CE reveals themes in people’s lives and is open to combinations of interests resulting in new and diverse career directions (Griffin, Brooks-Lane, Hammis & Crandell, in press).

What are the roles of Workforce Investment Act programs (One-Stops/Career Centers) and Vocational Rehabilitation in CE?

CE is specifically designed for anyone living a complex life. In this instance, we are considering people with significant disabilities. Both WIA and VR programs are vital partners in creating wage employment and/or small business ownership. Both systems can individually and collaboratively “braid” or amalgamate funding with other systems (CRPs or school transition programs, for instance). As an example, one young man with a diagnosis of autism needed funds for a small business start-up, as well as on-going support to make deliveries across town. The CRP funded an employment specialist to do

the driving several hours a day for the first year, until the young business owner could afford to hire his own employee to do the driving; VR purchased auto repairs for a vehicle donated by his family; and WIA, under a CE demonstration project, purchased several thousand dollars in production equipment. In other cases, a Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS) can also be used in combination with VR, CRP, and WIA funds to purchase equipment, put cash into a small business, pay for various supports, and also to assist with the identification and maintenance of a wage job (Griffin, Brooks-Lane, Hammis & Crandell, in press).

CE sounds creative, but what about today's Labor Market?

Over the past five years there has been a net loss of jobs in the United States. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities, however, remains unchanged from the 1990s when this country created over 22,000,000 new jobs. The labor market has almost zero impact on the employment rate of people with disabilities. What does have an impact is the will of leadership at all levels to make employment a priority. The money exists, the technology and techniques exist, and the employment opportunities exist.

CE is significantly different from competitive employment in that while competitive employment has been brutal to people with disabilities, CE recognizes that employers are always hiring. That is, there is always room in a company for people who match the culture and values of the company, who can perform work of value to the company, and who perform work that is valued by the customer who then purchases the fruits of the labor thereby creating and maintaining the employment opportunity. Without profit there are no jobs, so matching people with duties that create revenue overshadows the power of job descriptions that historically screen out people with significant disabilities. In essence CE demands that we focus on economic development and job creation as the antidote to reacting to the alleged demands of the fickle labor market.

This brief article addresses a few of the more common concerns regarding CE, but many more questions exist. For more information, please visit these websites:

www.customizedemployment.com

www.employmentforall.org

<http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition>

<http://ruralinstitute.umt.edu/training>

www.onestops.info

www.dol.gov/odep

www.worksupport.com

References are available on request by e-mailing Cary at cgriffin@griffinhammis.com