

Customized Job Development for Homeless Veterans with Disabilities

Fact Sheet #10

INTRODUCTION

The more significant an individual's disability, and the more complex a person's life, the more robust any job development effort must be. Most homeless vets' circumstances certainly pose complex barriers to employment, so traditional competitive approaches often prove ineffective. A customized method that circumvents traditional job search steps is needed. Customized Employment (CE) is not a service model or program, rather it is a process that builds on, short-circuits, or leverages other means of getting work. In short, CE methods minimize the use of comparative strategies that so often prove the undoing of traditional job development efforts. Even if applicants for a job are equally qualified, when employers weigh each applicant's potential, the individual with a disability is almost always disqualified. Because the vast majority of companies in the United States are small, hiring is still largely a personal decision. Matching applicants to places of employment that fulfill their "ideal conditions of employment" and using career exploration tactics including informational interviews and short-duration situational assessments or work trials, creates opportunities allowing the company owner or manager time to recognize shared interests between themselves and the job seeker. This example enhances personal connections and augments hiring potential.

In the past, much of the emphasis of rehabilitation has been the final stages of job development: prospecting; sales pitches; overcoming objections; and deal closings. In CE, the front-end work gets a healthier dose of attention, laying a solid foundation of job development to build upon. This foundation bears most of the weight of the effort, and cutting corners here turns the job search back into a traditional search for openings.



Virginia Commonwealth
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ASSESSMENT

Most work assessments or vocational evaluations use norm-referenced scores to categorize job seekers, measure their work readiness, and/or pinpoint careers. The problem with these approaches is that their usefulness is largely unsubstantiated, they are seldom environmentally relevant to the person's best fit, and are too limited in vocational options.

The CE approach assumes that all people are ready to engage in work tasks that accommodate their skills and interests; that provide the opportunity for growth in additional tasks and skills, or another job on the career path; that there are unlimited ways to make a living in the world; that employers are quite used to training people new to their workforce; and that enhancing personal connections and leveraging social capital are largely under-utilized methods of getting around traditional Human Resources (HR) barriers. Of course, due to an intense lack of personal social capital and networks, the homeless vet must be more reliant on the bridging effects of those people assisting in the job search and stabilization processes.

DISCOVERY

Discovery is a functional assessment process that gathers existing information, focused on understanding the individual, their support needs, skills and interests directly related to employment, and shapes the ultimate design of job development. Depending on the circumstances of an individual's life and disability, their past work history and interest and/or ability to still perform essential tasks post-injury, and their overall career goals, Discovery is modified in intensity to frame a career plan.

The Discovery Flow:

Start with the people he or she is closest to. Discuss with the vet, and those she knows, interests, skills and tasks once or currently performed, and the level of expertise. Explore the surrounding neighborhoods for employment or work-experience opportunities, transportation resources, and places to learn new skills.

Don't simply go to places of interest; participate. In other words, plan activities that demonstrate the skills and tasks the vet can perform, wants to learn, and has an interest in learning. Stringing together a series of work trials that showcase skills in areas of interest offer concrete clues into competencies, support needs, and ecological fit of certain companies.

Seek to establish at least three over-riding vocational themes in the vet's life. These are not job descriptions, such as "wants to be a truck mechanic." Instead, think more broadly; in this case think transportation. This leads to a richer series of activities in relevant environments. Someone interested in truck maintenance may be grasping at the one job they've experienced or that someone has told them they might be able to do. By exploring the broader field of transportation, using both Informational Interviews and short work-experiences, a world of possible tasks and environments is opened, from race tracks, to airports, to train yards, State Highway Department, to the local car wash, to a body shop, a John Deere implements dealer, and the thousands of other companies that deal with various aspects of transit. Refining takes place after one knows the options.

Continuing with this example for instance, the homeless vet reveals skills and interests in trucks, and perhaps has some experience working in the motor pool during basic training, a possible vocational theme, borne out by more discussion and some short work trials or truck-related activities, is indeed transportation. Transportation is a much larger field than just "working on trucks," and therefore poses much greater potential for revealing possible employment. This broader perspective is especially important when considering the impact a disability has on one's ability to perform the essential functions in a traditional job description.

Suppose this vet is counseled using traditional means and reports that he wants to be a truck driver or a mechanic. Reviewing standard job descriptions from a few trucking companies reveals that the mechanics must be able to drive in order to test vehicles, and to deliver customers' vehicles, or run the parts truck to town for deliveries. Likewise, these companies require commercial licenses for all drivers. However, this particular vet cannot pass a typical or a commercial driver's test due to a significant vision impairment and a prescription for psychotropic medicine. The job search then heads elsewhere, when in fact, there may be many other tasks this person is good at and/or could learn. A broader view of transportation likely reveals a plethora of tasks related to trucks and transportation, working around others with similar interests. And, working around others with similar interests is a proven means of growing into a career, establishing friendships, and enhancing job retention. In this case, thinking in terms of job descriptions was too narrow, but seeking out transportation businesses will reveal job carving or creation opportunities including: mechanical work without driving; specialty work needed by garages including air conditioning service; or even driving a fork lift in a factory. Remember that Orville and Wilbur Wright did not have pilot's licenses, and that opportunities abound beyond the accepted folklore of the job description.

Develop a solid profile statement capturing the essence of the person, their predominant skills, and the three vocational themes. A recent, effective narrative reads:

"Robert is an accomplished veteran man with varied interests ranging from music, to farming, and cooking. His skills range from playing the saxophone, to cultivation and preparation of farm land, to the numerous skills necessary for raising and breeding chickens. He fits best in workplaces where the day's duties are scheduled, teamwork predominates, and where quality is more important than speed."

Roberts's themes are stated broadly, then stated more precisely, along with his ideal conditions of employment. From this simple statement, Lists of Twenty places where people who pursue the same interest work can be constructed for each theme, and job searches, using informational interviews (see attachment) begun.

Make Assessment and Job Development a project. That is, manage it with a start and finish date. Customized Employment is not about getting a dream job. In CE, getting a job is the beginning of the rehabilitation process, not the end. Therefore, starting with a job that matches existing or quickly learned skills, in an environment that fits the vet's profile is the desired outcome for now. We are finding that precise focus on an individual by a team should result in adequate Discovery within 20 to 60 hours over an 8-week period. This is more time than traditional assessment takes, but it speeds the job development process and

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

CE is not a reactive methodology. In other words, the ideas of labor market demand and traditional job search are given little credence. CE represents a pro-active approach to employment, recognizing that most of the jobs that exist are hidden from the public eye, most jobs are never advertised, that employers are always hiring people who match their needs and who can generate profits, and that there are unlimited opportunities for work. One of the biggest mistakes job seekers and job developers make is thinking in terms of job descriptions. Since most people only know and understand a handful of job descriptions, it is better to think in broader terms.

JOB DEVELOPMENT

Searching for work begins as Discovery ends. Some guidelines for this economy that utilize the CE approach include:

- ▶ CE relies on negotiated job tasks that mutually benefit the employee and the employer. By approaching specific employers who have task needs matching the job seeker's talents, a match is more easily determined.
- ▶ Understand that employers are always hiring. They are hiring people who fit their company and who can generate their paychecks through profits. Charity models of employment seldom produce lasting, valued employment. Employers don't necessarily "hire vets" they hire good workers; they don't hire "jobs programs" either, they hire individuals.
- ▶ If filling out applications and going through interviews is anything more than a formality after the job is secured to make Human Resources happy, then it's probably not customized. CE circumvents traditional comparative processes that screen people with disabilities out. There is nothing inherently bad about these processes for people who can survive them; but many vets with disabilities are quickly screened out. Again, CE is based on negotiation, not the traditional employment process.
- ▶ For each of the three vocational themes, develop a non-duplicative list of Twenty Places where the career makes sense. In other words, list twenty specific places of employment in the community, accessible to the person, where others with matching skills and interests work. Listing twenty companies is difficult, but a list of only 5 or 10 employers minimizes the creativity in employment development options.

Use Informational Interviews to solicit information and advice that informs the employment process. By asking for advice, and tours of businesses, tasks generally hidden from the public are revealed and if a match seems possible, job development can be introduced. Informational interviews should not be used to trick a potential employer, but rather to allow the exchange of advice, and to provide an environment where job seekers and employers can discuss their shared interests. During these interviews and tours, the needs of businesses are often revealed that pose opportunities for job creation.

Informational interviews are formally scheduled and launched at the meeting by simply saying to the employer: “tell us about your career.” Then, as the individual talks, ask about how they hire, where they find employees, what competition keeps them on their toes, what role technology plays in the future of the business, etc. All these discussion items point to information vital to finding a niche job or to addressing a pending need the business will need to address. Concern about competitiveness is also a point at which Resource Ownership possibilities are unearthed, wherein the individual brings specific tools or technology with them that make them more employable, in the same way a college grad brings a diploma or a carpenter brings their tools to a job.

Rely less on Retail. In this economy, retail sales are floundering. Also, retail has been stripped of much of its complexity. In many box stores, for instance, articles arrive, they’re shelved, then removed if not sold in 30 days, re-boxed, and shipped out. The paucity of skills being learned through such a job dead-ends most career paths. Instead, look for jobs with increasing complexity in work tasks. Such jobs mean more stable work, an abundance of worksite support because co-workers are less likely to turn-over, greater likelihood of mastering equipment or technology, and therefore, greater earnings potential.

Seek out small businesses. There are only 17,000 businesses in the United States with more than 500 employees. There are approximately 27 million small businesses, the majority of which have no Human Resources Department or even job descriptions. Fewer barriers to employment means greater opportunity to meet directly with the decision maker and to connect over shared interests and mutual benefit. Having this opportunity to meet directly with a small business owner/operator who shares similar interests with the vet reduces stress, eases conversation, and increases the likelihood the employer will hire or at least offer referrals to others in his or her supply chain or business network. While common interests do not guarantee a job offer, the combination of highlighted skills, experience, and commitment augment the prospects of success.

There are unlimited ways to make a living in the world, and most of the jobs people do are hidden from the public. The tools, equipment, methods, and technology used in modern companies or in the various skilled trades are seldom understood by those who have never done those jobs. Many people understand that their mailman delivers the mail, but few understand the sorting process; most individuals understand how grocery stores stock shelves, but they don’t understand inventory control or the Health Department regulations that store managers deal with daily. In both examples, people with specific skills, interests, and talents perform best, and these skills are different than those seen by the customer or the traditional job developer and applicant.

Relying on work orders from employers or memories of the 5 or 6 jobs offered by our high school Guidance Counselors is quite constricting compared to the vast array of jobs and tasks performed everyday in the world of work. CE represents an unrestrained economic development approach to infinite job creation and restructuring. Negotiate with employers while highlighting skills that match their customers’ needs instead of looking for stereotypical openings.

CONCLUSION

The most difficult aspects of job development are usually matching the employee to a job that fits them and getting face-to-face with an employer long enough to form a cursory bond with the job seeker. The above process allows for both and circumvents old processes of standing in line and hoping someone will notice a homeless vet’s resume in a stack of 50 others.

