

VCU-RRTC on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities

Research Study #3: Customized Employment as an Evidence-Based Practice to Improve the Employment Outcomes of Transition-age Youth with Physical Disabilities



What is Discovery?

Research Brief #1 -- November, 2015

Introduction

In 2014, customized employment was added to the definition of supported employment in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which was signed into law on July 22, 2014. Customized employment (CE) was initially defined in the Federal Register as a blending of services and supports. CE may include -- 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).

CE demonstrations to date have generated support at the national, state, and individual participant levels in an effort to expand and identify an array of employment supports of benefit to people with significant disabilities. The next step is movement from practitioner descriptions to research-validated, evidenced-based practices that can be consistently replicated. The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities is conducting research on customized employment for individuals with physical disabilities. The first step in the research is to define the components of customized employment by conducting a series of focus groups with national experts and practitioners who have been identified as providing exemplary services. This Question and Answer Research Brief presents some of the preliminary findings from this research. Specifically, this brief will define the term, "discovery," which is one of the key components of customized employment.

■ Question: Who participated in the focus groups?

Individuals who were known to the research team as "nationally recognized experts" on customized employment were invited to participate in the focus groups. A total of 19 individuals responded to the invitation and consented to participate using an online consent process. These individuals were then contacted with suggested times to meet as a group using a toll-free call-in number. Of the 19 individuals who consented to participate as national experts, 14 individuals called in during the three scheduled conference calls. Individuals who participated were assured



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of the confidentiality of their responses, and the calls were recorded with permission of the participants. Names and other identifying information were removed from the transcripts prior to data analysis.

Once the calls were conducted with the national experts, they were asked to recommend individuals known to them as “exemplary implementers of customized employment.” These individuals were contacted by e-mail and asked if they would participate in focus groups to discuss customized employment. A total of 15 implementers consented to participate, and 14 individuals called in during the two scheduled conference calls. As with the national expert focus groups, the calls were recorded and transcribed with permission of the participants. Names and other identifying information were removed from the transcripts prior to data analysis.

■ Question: **What questions were discussed?**

Two sets of questions were used to guide the focus groups: one for the national experts and one for the implementers. The first set of questions for the national experts was developed by the research team and was revised based on feedback from two national consultants in customized employment. Eight questions guided the discussion for the national experts.

The following are the questions from the national experts’ focus groups.

- What are the underlying values of customized employment?
- Could one person give us a case study example?
- What are the specific strategies used in customized employment?
 - Probe: Are there any more strategies?
 - Probe: I would like for you to describe each of these strategies.
 - Probe: Be as specific and concrete as you can.
 - Probe: Can you give more detail?
- Do you want to add anything related to the process of working with an individual when using a customized employment approach?
- Do you want to add anything related to the process of working with business/employers when using a customized employment approach?
- What would you like to tell me that I haven’t asked?

The questions for the implementers focus groups were developed after the national expert focus groups based on the specific strategies identified by the expert groups. This included 12 questions on the strategies identified including discovery, community-action teams or individual support teams, informational interviews, and job negotiation, and job shadowing. On average, the telephone focus groups for both the national experts and the implementers lasted for 90 minutes.

■ Question: **How was the data analyzed?**

As previously mentioned, the focus group phone calls were transcribed for each focus group that was conducted. One member of the research team analyzed the transcripts to develop themes from the qualitative data. As she coded another team member checked for agreement. When agreement was

not present, the two researchers discussed until consensus was obtained. Although the focus group questions were intended to prompt information about the entire customized employment process, the majority of the dialogue focused on the “discovery” process. Eleven themes, or what is being referred to as core practices, were identified. While the themes are listed from one to 11 in the following table, this is not intended to imply that core practices occur in the sequence presented. In some instances, the practices occur simultaneously. For instance, while meeting at a location of the individual’s choice, the person supporting the job seeker should be mindfully listening to the individual and working to build rapport.

**Core
Discovery
Practices**

1. Physically meet at a location of individual’s choosing.
2. Build rapport and get to know the individual.
3. Mindfully listen to the individual.
4. Identify his/her interests, skills, and abilities.
5. Conduct in-depth interviews with family and friends concerning the person, the person’s interests, skills, and abilities.
6. Observe the person in daily activities in a number of different community settings.
7. Arrange for the individual to observe at local businesses that potentially match his or her interests, skills, and abilities.
8. Observe the person engaging in job related tasks.
9. Conduct informational interviews with employers at local businesses that are representative of the individual’s interests, skills, and abilities.
10. Assist the person in selecting brief work experiences to refine / identify potential job opportunities.
11. Collaborate with the person, family, and friends in confirming the person’s interests, job preferences, skills, and abilities.

■ **Question: What did the participants say about discovery?**

The individuals who participated in the focus groups all agreed that discovery is the foundation of good customized employment. It is one of the elements that differentiate it from other employment interventions. As one expert commented, “People who have some discovery do better in jobs. They last longer. They’re happier.” Discovery is a requisite step before job development / negotiation and subsequent employment. Discovery is capacity-based, not deficit-based. The experts were clear about what discovery is not. Discovery is not “spending time on a computer, administering assessments, taking notes, using checklists, ranking competencies, or comparing. Discovery does not include predicting or guessing what a person can do or identifying jobs that are available in the labor market. So what is discovery?

Discovery is a fluid process in which the number of core practices used may vary with only a few practices to all core discovery practices used. For instance, some practices such as mindfully listening to the person is used throughout the discovery process. While another practice, such as observing in community businesses may not be needed by everyone who is receiving customized employment services. In addition, there is no specific order to completing the core discovery practices although there might seem to be a logical order to assisting an individual in finding employment. In other words, the discovery process is “individualized” and varies for each job seeker.

The groups of experts discussed the importance of the mindset one must have to engage in discovery. It is being open. “[Discovery is] keeping your assumptions at bay and really learning who the person is, and utilizing observation and not making assumptions.” One expert clearly stated the importance of being open and not making assumptions.

“I just finished working with a woman who painted with her mouth and everybody in her life thought she should be an artist, and that wasn’t what she wanted to do. So, but it was a really natural place to jump to. So holding your assumptions at bay is incredibly important.”

■ Question: How do you use a person’s interests to identify potential areas of employment?

The participants discussed a number of ways that interests could be explored for helping the person identify a job of choice. One expert made the following statement.

“People have an interest, but it’s often not coupled with a skillset or you can do any task related to that, which is maybe our error in not asking the right question when we ask if somebody has an interest...I have an interest in sewing but I’ve never sewn before.”

On the surface, this quote seems to imply that the person could not be employed in her area of interest, sewing. Instead, it is important to seek out confirming information through asking and observing. The person may not be able to sew, but informational interviews could lead to job possibilities that match the individual’s interests in sewing. **Hence it is of the utmost importance to keep an open mind during every component of discovery.** An open mind is crucial to engaging in discovery and customized employment.

In addition, people who are supporting the individual should not immediately conclude the type of job that the person should have without exploring or brainstorming different options. One group of experts discussed identifying “employment themes” “or creating a vocational profile” during discovery. Employment themes are used as a guide to lead the vocational professional and individual “to different kinds of businesses”.

“It is [important] to “meet the customer[s] as we find them. Not everyone has helpful family. Not everyone has friends. Not everyone lives in the community. Not everyone can articulate what they want to do or has an idea of what they want to do.”

Some job seekers can tell you what they want to do in a job, and they have the abilities to do the preferred job. These individuals may not need all of the core practices to complete discovery. However, there are others who have job preferences but don’t have the skills to engage in the preferred job. Still other job seekers have no idea what they want to do and what they can do. This last group of job seekers may need to complete all the core practices in discovery. Thus, the individualized discovery process begins with the vocational professional getting into the mindset of beginning discovery where the job seeker is family, friends, and community supports job seeker’s interests, preferences, and abilities developed (or not).

■ **Question: Should the core practices of discovery be conducted in sequence? Do all of the practices need to be done in order for discovery to be completed?**

Although discovery is not sequential, there is a core practice that begins the process. The job seeker selects where he/she will meet the professional for the first appointment (Core Discovery Practice 1). Most service delivery begins by meeting the job seeker at the agency's office. However, the person may not want to meet at an unfamiliar location but at a location where he or she is comfortable. The goal of the first meeting is to begin building rapport and getting to know the job seeker (Core Discovery Practice 2).

"I really don't think you can assist a person ... to get out of poverty by not knowing who they are."

[Discovery] is getting to know a person, their likes, interests, preferences and bring those things into what they want to do and where their future might go, how to improve the quality of their lives as opposed to traditional vocational assessments.

It is important to understand the benefits the job seeker receives as well as the amount of family and friend support.

[M]eet the person where they're at in terms of what do they need, what do we need to learn about them. There are some people that come with a lot more capacity to say hey, it's this, this and this and you don't need to do that kind of in-depth time in the community with them, but its fundamentally starting with where the person is at and really getting to know and understand them.

■ **Question: What did the focus group participants have to say about listening to the individual?**

During the discovery process, the job seeker must be heard. Professionals must mindfully listen while actively asking questions to understand the person (Core Discovery Practice 3). The questions should not be pre-developed but arise from listening to what the person is saying as well as observing the person in locations of choice.

I would spend time listening and asking them questions, what they like to do. I would ask if they were interested in having me at their home. I would ask if they didn't want to have me at their home. I would observe them wherever they are most comfortable.

During this meeting and at subsequent meetings, the goal is to determine the person's interests, skills, and abilities (Core Discovery Practice 4). While the participants did not specify how many meetings or observations are necessary, it was clear that getting to know the person is on-going throughout customized employment process. Getting to know the person typically begins with asking what he or she would like to do.

Some job seekers are verbal and know what they want to do and will immediately tell you, *"I want to work with the plants."* For many job seekers, in which customized employment will be the most effective intervention will have no idea what they may want to do. The only experience this person may have is

adult day training or less - nothing. Asking “What do you like to do?” provides a good place to start the discussion but is only the beginning of getting to know the individual.

One expert cautioned:

You need to be incredibly careful, because some people have interests that they don't want to do for pay, and some people have interests that they do want to do for pay. So insuring that you make the distinction of whether a person's interests relate to the tasks they want to do for pay is incredibly important.

However, many individuals with significant disabilities will not be able to discuss their interests or say what they want to do for work. One expert said the following:

“What do you do? You can't just ask some people what do you want to do and they sit there and look at you and then it's like you go back to the old bad practice of let me go see if I can figure out some job that I can put you into because you say you don't want to or you don't know what you want to do.”

■ Question: What can be done if the person cannot discuss his or her interests?

Ask family members and friends through in-depth interviews about the person's interests, skills, and abilities. Observe the person during daily activities in a number of different community settings. One expert illustrated this in the following example.

I worked with a woman who was 50 years old, had multiple physical and cognitive disabilities, and all she wanted in her life was a job. She had been put into numerous volunteer positions, but never a job. We first conducted discovery. In the discovery, I observed her in her volunteer position, I observed her in the community, I interviewed a whole host of people who knew her well, and two threads came out from all the interviews. One thread was that she was extremely religious, and then another thread came out that she had helped her sister-in-law design her wedding invitation, which nobody knew that she had any kind of artistic ability or any kind of computer knowledge at all.

For some job seekers more discovery work is needed than just interviewing family and friends and observing the job seeker in daily activities to develop employment themes or profiles. The job seeker may need to observe at local businesses that potentially match the person's interests, skills, and abilities (Core Discovery Practice 7). The businesses are identified based on the information gathered during discovery activities that have taken place to this point. Arrangements are made so that the individual can observe different types of jobs at local businesses using the informational interview process.

■ Question: How do you know if the person is really interested in different types of jobs?

Observations of the jobseeker engaging in job tasks that fit his/her employment themes or profile may provide more information (Core Discovery Practice 8). There are two goals in having the

jobseeker engage in job related tasks. One is to identify the person's skills, and the other is to assist the jobseeker in deciding if he or she likes doing the job tasks.

We had a gentleman who had an interest in doing things, mechanical things, and he takes apart computers, and we were able to observe him taking apart computers at his house and putting them back together, but I don't have the knowledge of whether he did that correctly... [W]e had someone that was a computer technology guy who built computers for people, he had him come in for a couple of hours in the afternoon and had him work alongside of him and was able to give us that professional feedback that he indeed does have some skills there.

A community action team may be used to find appropriate situations for the jobseeker to demonstrate his/her skills and what he/she can do. Community action teams include people who are not paid to help the person find a job. These individuals bring their own social capital, community connections, and ideas of the community's resources to the table for brainstorming employment ideas. For instance, one expert stated the following:

Some of the discovery has been started, and we're saying, we're just struggling. Joe really likes cars, but we can't quite figure out what that vocational theme looks like. We're not really sure what he can do with that, can you help us think [about] that? Somebody will say, "Joe can you change oil?" "No, I've never done that." "Well can you try it?" "Well maybe so!" "Well I know somebody who has a garage, let me [have] them to get in touch with you." We literally start to collect connections in the community from this rich resource.

In another situation, the parent was able to arrange for her son to demonstrate his skills.

I had a guy in [location] this is a story about the community helping and the employers helping although, it is customized. A guy out there had a bad car accident and was in a wheelchair, and his mom had worked for this company before, so they starting thinking about him coming to work because he had a propensity for welding, ok, he liked to weld. She brought him in and they gave him some tasks, and apparently he was able to weld, primarily just little things, not big stuff.

■ Question: **How are informational interviews used for identifying potential employment opportunities?**

Another Core Discovery Practice (9) uses informational interviews with employers at local businesses that are representative of the job seeker's interests, skills, and abilities. These informational interviews are conducted to determine how to use the skills set that the person has within the preferred job theme. In one situation, a participant in one of the focus groups had determined that the jobseeker was very slow in using current computer technology and assistive technology would not increase her speed. Discovery revealed that the individual had a religious theme, and the expert pursued it by conducting informational interviews.

[I] went to several different churches. I went to one church I happened to know the pastor, started talking about this woman's interest in working in a church, talking about what she can do, very slow, data entry...She drove her electric chair by joy stick but not very well so she kind of needed very large halls and to not bump into people and things. Anyhow, the pastor identified that they were in the process of transferring all the information onto the computer of their history. He didn't care how quickly it went, but he needed it done. The other thing was that, when this person was a little girl, unbeknownst to me, she went to that church and the pastor remembered her. She got hired at \$10 an hour. She started at 10 hours a week, this was a couple of years ago, and I believe now she's working 20 hours a week.

Summary

These initial focus groups with national experts and implementers in customized employment offer information on how discovery can assist individuals with disabilities in identifying jobs of choice. More information is needed on how to negotiate positions with employers once the person has ideas on what he or she wants to do. This preliminary work provides some direction to service providers who are working towards ensuring that individuals with disabilities have choices and options for employment. More work is clearly needed in order to provide information on and define the evidence-based practices of customized employment.

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