

# Customized Employment: Where we are; where we're headed

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**Abstract.** Customized Employment (CE) represents the natural evolution of supported employment (SE). The techniques used challenge traditional methods and build on SE and relevant competitive employment strategies, but they do represent a departure from having the local job market needs dictate the employment sought. Instead, CE starts with the person and engages employers through an interest-based negotiation revealing the benefits hiring a specific job seeker will have for both parties. The promise of this approach is that stereotypical jobs are reduced and employment better matching an individual's "personal genius" occurs.

**Keywords:** Customized employment, disabilities, future of supported employment

## 1. Introduction

The promise of Customized Employment rests in its reliance on the passion and competence of job seekers and those who assist them. The mutual benefits that result when job seekers with disabilities are matched to employers needing their skills and energy has the potential to finally make the employment of people with disabilities a mainstream and natural occurrence. The U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability & Employment Policy (ODEP) explained in the *Federal Register* 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;

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- 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 [7,9,12].

Pursuant to the incubation of CE, ODEP funded CE demonstration projects across the country, along with technical assistance centers ranging from improving Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) practices, to addressing mental illness and homelessness, and enhancing transition from school to work, etc. Much of what we know about effective practices came from this investment, and ODEP continues to expand the understanding of CE principles through policy work, linkages with employers, and a significant investment in business ownership development with the newly established START-UP-USA project ([www.start-up-usa.biz](http://www.start-up-usa.biz)) and initial self employment development sites in New York, Florida, and Alaska.

## 2. The current environment

Many Community Rehabilitation Programs have adopted Supported Employment and even microenterprise development in the attempt to address the high unemployment and under-employment rate of individuals with disabilities. Regardless of disability type, be it developmental, psychiatric, brain injury, sensory, or physical, no particular group of people with disabilities is flourishing. Despite the ever increasing funding for disability-related programs and the additional layers of enabling legislation, the overall unemployment rate remains at approximately 65% [16]. College graduates with disabilities do not do remarkably better than the average and remain unemployed at a rate of over 54% [10]. Individuals with psychiatric disabilities find jobs at a rate of less than 15% [2], and Armed Services Veterans with spinal cord injuries face an astounding unemployment rate of over 60% [18].

During the 1990's, a decade that witnessed the strongest economy in the history of the United States, enrollments for sheltered workshops increased and the number of special education students graduating into paid jobs remained agonizingly low [6,15,19]. The trend continues today with a meager 26% of adults with developmental disabilities securing community employment annually, primarily through the efforts of

Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) supported employment personnel [16].

This same time period witnessed the success of Supported Employment (SE) techniques, with over 150,000 individuals now in community jobs [20]. In the two decades since the passage of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1986, the number of individuals with significant disabilities working in community employment has increased steadily and the funding for supported employment has grown substantially. However, growth has also occurred in the number of persons in day and work programs in segregated settings [4]. From 1992 through 2002, supported employment enrollment for adults with developmental disabilities grew to almost 120,000 individuals. However, another 365,000 individuals with developmental disabilities were being served in segregated work programs, and the majority of individuals with severe psychiatric disabilities receiving services remained in non-work day treatment programs, even though the cost of supported employment success ranges from only \$2,000 to \$8,000; less than the typical annual cost of day programs [17]. The total number of individuals with developmental disabilities in supported employment leveled off at 24% in FY 2002 [3,4]. For every single person in integrated employment earning competitive wages, three individuals remained in sheltered settings. Earnings for those in sheltered employment were, on average, substantially below minimum wage [5,13].

## 3. What's so new about CE?

CE represents the natural evolution of supported employment. The techniques used challenge traditional methods and build on SE and relevant competitive employment strategies, but they do represent a departure from "chasing smokestacks" or having the local job market needs dictate the employment sought. Instead, CE starts with the person and engages employers through an interest-based negotiation revealing the benefits hiring a specific job seeker will have for both parties. The promise of this approach is that stereotypical jobs are reduced and employment better matching an individual's "personal genius" occurs.

This process emanates from the assessment phase commonly called Discovery [8]. Discovery seeks to answer the question: "Who is this person?" Further, through a series of meetings with family and acquaintances, paid work experiences, observation of skills, talents, and interests in desired community environ-

ments, etc., a vocational profile emerges that reveals the *ideal conditions of employment* for this individual. Over a period of several weeks, the individual begins to emerge; replete with complexities, nuances, and interests seldom captured through psychometric testing, interest interviews, or observation in special education resource rooms or adult day programs. Several states, through their DD and Mental Health administrations and/or Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies have mechanisms in place to purchase discovery specifically by name, or as simply a part of what they currently classify as assessment or job plan development. In several states, for instance, a VR milestone payment for assessment and developing a draft job development plan averages \$750, or 15 hours at \$50. Discovery done well often results in initial job leads too, further reducing costs at the provider level.

#### 4. Informational interviews: Going where the career makes sense

Once a profile is defined, the job search begins. One strategy is to use a *Naïve Approach*, engaging employers through informational interviews [8]. This tactic deviates from typical job development sales approaches and instead involves reviewing the vocational profile to identify areas of interest and competence revealed through discovery, making a list of 15 or 20 places where people with similar interests and talents work, and contacting these employers requesting a tour. The initial contact is disarming because no request for employment is made. Instead, the employment specialist identifies herself as a “career counselor” and explains that she is assisting a person in developing a career plan, and the research process involves exploring a host of occupational opportunities. A time is requested to tour and discuss the employer’s own career path. In essence the employer becomes a career consultant to the individual; they get to meet without the obligation of employment looming and restricting conversation, and the process pairs employers and job seekers who share similar vocational interests. Using this technique in Maryland, five jobs were developed in one month for individuals with developmental disabilities; in Pennsylvania, four jobs offers came in one day. Instead of pressuring businesses through sales calls, both the employer and the job seeker are allowed to grow into the relationship. If no job seems possible, the process also allows for the possibility of developing paid work experiences in order to gain more insight into working, the worker, and employers.

#### 5. Resource ownership

While not necessarily a standard practice in CE, resource ownership is a valuable means of improving job match and enhancing an individual’s value to an employer. Resource ownership is a mutually beneficial process of acquiring materials, equipment, or skills that, when matched to a job seeker’s interests and customer needs, generates profits for the employer and wages for the employee [13]. The average cost of a bachelor’s degree from a state-supported college today is approximately \$50,000 [14] and that degree is a commonly and culturally accepted symbol of exploitable resources. Employers reason that they can profit from a graduate’s intellect so people with degrees get hired and earn substantially more over a lifetime than those without degrees. In essence, the graduate gives the employer that degree, a \$50,000 resource, in trade for wages and career growth opportunity. The same occurs when a truck driver who owns a tractor-trailer applies for a hauling job. Without the trucking equipment, the trucker faces unemployment, or a less satisfactory, lower paying hauling job. People must have exploitable resources to get good jobs, and putting the means of production in the hands of people with disabilities makes them more employable [11,13].

Examples of resource ownership from across the country include:

- A woman interested in fashion design who owns a computerized embroiderer and works in a clothing store customizing children’s clothes;
- A woman in a rural western state interested in computers who owns desktop and laptop computers enabling her to make house calls to repair computers as well as to produce local civic club and church newsletters from her home office;
- A man who owns a portable power sprayer for steam cleaning decks, house siding, and boats;
- A transition-aged student who owns a carpet cleaner creating a job at a car detailer, etc.

The examples are numerous and diverse. Most were relatively low-cost when compared to life-long enrollment in a day program. Many were purchased through VR or the use of Plans for Achieving Self Support (PASS) through the Social Security Administration, again illustrating the use of an amalgamated funding strategy that increases useable cash and engages numerous systems existing to assist in employment. CE emphasizes the mutual benefits of employer and employee, and resource ownership is an enhanced approach to creating mutual gain.

## 6. Entry-level employment and deep job development

There is certainly nothing wrong with entry-level jobs. Most of us used such employment to fund our college educations or to work our way up the ladder of success. However, one outcome of the CE process has been the re-examination of the role of these jobs in typical lives. Anecdotal findings indicate that for many of us, these jobs were not randomly sought; they actually reflected our interests as adolescents and young adults, or presented opportunities to work alongside our friends. So too then should entry-level jobs for people with disabilities represent their interests, competencies, and preferences, and not simply be selected because of their ubiquitous existence in the labor market, or as a way to prove one's readiness or worthiness for a job. Matching first jobs to a person's skills and interests may foster a more rapid vocational maturation, and the opportunity to work towards a true career path.

The fact remains that many people with disabilities are placed in high-turnover low-skilled jobs because we have failed to train front line staff how to teach complex tasks to consumers, and because these same staff are expendable in the system and do not have the organizational support (i.e. time, training, funding) to get deeper inside businesses where jobs of more complexity, stability, and status are found. Grocery bagging, for instance, is a typical job at a grocery store. Does the discovery process typically reveal interests in such jobs? Not in our experience. While these are great entry-level opportunities, they tend to be high turnover thus decreasing peer support on the job site thereby increasing the amount of job coaching (read: on-going expense to the provider and increased stigma for the employee), and there is less employer buy-in for advancement away from this critical position for an accomplished bagger (read: why promote the person when they are needed here in this low paid but essential customer service function?).

One may well begin their grocery career as a bagger, but job developers should further explore the inner workings of the grocery industry, if indeed the job seeker has an interest in such an environment and related job duties. Most super markets include a Union butcher shop, a produce department, an Information Technology department, Clerical, shipping and receiving, and management departments. All these operations employ people, therefore bagging groceries should be only one possibly out of a hundred options explored through cre-

ative instruction, job carving, and interest-based job negotiations.

CE opens up the options for employment and demands attention to both the job seeker and the employer. Using a host of tools, guided by discovery and seeking the ideal conditions of employment, new career opportunities are abundant since there are unlimited ways to make a living. And, if a person or a community presents limited wage earner capacities, CE also embraces self employment as an option for employment.

## 7. Best-practices

Currently, CE is scratching hard at the surface of employment options. Medicaid continues to dominate the funding of most vocational programs for individuals with the most significant work disabilities, and many state VR agencies and Workforce Centers are overwhelmed with massive caseloads and/or procedures that limit their ability to customize jobs. But the early adopters are challenging old strategies with interesting and encouraging outcomes.

In Georgia, for instance, the state re-wrote its DD Medicaid waiver and it includes CE by name. Numerous states, Maryland and Florida among them, are using the Community Plus template from Medicaid to expand employment and self employment options and have had these efforts bolstered by VR initiatives in microenterprise funding, and by CRP training initiatives.

In California, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Iowa, North Dakota, Minnesota, North Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and numerous other states, CE initiatives, including an emphasis on self employment and self determination, are funded through state DD Councils, VR initiatives, and Medicaid Infrastructure Grants. Transition projects using customized approaches are up and running through Social Security Administration initiatives, and again DD Councils, in states as far flung as Mississippi, California, Montana, and Kansas. And there is growing interest in CE from the mental health community from Hawaii to New York, Illinois to South Carolina.

Across the nation, new efforts are being made, in the spirit of CE, to enhance lives. The Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE) is evolving as they collaborate with the Autism Society of America (ASA) to sponsor some of the first national training sessions on employment for people with autism. NISH has funded a Customized Employment project aimed at advancing the careers of individuals employed on

Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act (JWOD) projects nationally, and is establishing an Institute on Economic Empowerment in order to move forward their agenda of higher wages and good jobs. The National Disability Institute, The World Institute on Disability, and others are researching and testing asset accumulation and management for people with disabilities. Social Security is expanding the use of work incentives through the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) projects and its potential revamping of Ticket to Work. The Medicaid Infrastructure Grants (MIGs) are reducing barriers to employment and in some states adopting CE approaches. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) within the U.S. Department of Education maintains its commitment to the CRP-RCEPs which in turn are training more and more professionals in the intricacies of CE nationally. The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) within the Department of Labor continues to support the placement of disability navigators in the One-Stops, and ODEP maintains its leadership role through innovative projects and commitment to developing inclusive communities.

This is a time of rapid change and innovation, spawned in part by the CE movement. Much of the foundation was laid with supported employment. Customized Employment challenges us all to be more creative, more person-centered, and more open to adventure in the workplace. Perhaps even more mainstream.

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