

Guest Editorial

Customized Employment

The term, customized employment, is attributed to a speech that Secretary of Labor, Elaine Chao, made upon being confirmed by the U.S. Senate in 2001. In that speech, Ms. Chao referred to customization as a trend in the labor market. Within 6 months of her speech, the Office of Disability Employment Policy, a new office within the U.S. Department of Labor, put forth in the Federal Register, a major initiative from the U.S. Department of Labor. They termed that initiative “customized employment” [1]. The definition of customized employment that was published in the Federal Register is as follows:

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)

Customized employment was conceived as a way for the generic One-Stop System to welcome and serve individuals with disabilities. The principles and indicators of customized employment have developed over the course of the past two decades with the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in their communities [3]. Some of the critical components include: 1) customer choice, 2) the belief that individuals should be viewed

from an abilities vs. disability perspective, 3) individualized and negotiated job descriptions, 4) competitive/prevaling wages, and 5) customer directed services with individualized workplace supports.

In essence, customized employment involves getting to know the person and the unique skills and talents that he or she can bring to a community business. Customized employment is not driven by the local labor market but by the needs of the individual with disabilities. Once a person’s skills, talents, and interests are identified, employers can be approached, and a customized job negotiated that is of benefit to both the job seeker and the business. The outcome from the negotiation process with employers is that:

- 1) The employee with a disability has a personalized job description that did not exist prior to the negotiation process.
- 2) The employer has a qualified work with a disability to perform valued job duties within the workplace.

As previously mentioned, customized employment as a term was created to bring the concept of providing services and supports to individuals with disabilities within the One-Stop Service Delivery System. In order to build the capacity of One Stops to implement customized employment, ODEP funded demonstration efforts throughout the country beginning in 2001. This special issue of the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation highlights some of the outcomes from these projects.

The issue begins with an article by Griffin and his associates. They provide an overview of the employment of individuals with disabilities tracing the roots of customized employment to supported employment. These authors also detail how the two are similar and then describe the uniqueness of customized employment.

Elinson and her colleagues present the findings from an independent evaluation completed by Westat of the ODEP Demonstration Program. This study shows that

it is feasible to deliver a customized employment approach to people with disabilities as part of the WIA One-Stop system. The authors conclude that continued policy and research efforts are necessary to customize supports and services so the One-Stop system will truly achieve universal accessibility.

Fesko and her co-authors describe a variety of partnership models that have been developed among the workforce development system and disability providers as a result of the ODEP projects. Examples of partnerships demonstrated by the Customized Employment and WorkFORCE Action grantees are provided as well as suggestions for implementation at the local level. This article closes with recommendations focusing on partnerships within the local workforce development as well as provides federal recommendations that support and encourage collaboration within the system.

Citron and his colleagues describe and analyze their efforts focused on developing customized employment opportunities through a community rehabilitation program in Georgia. A case study approach and qualitative data is used to demonstrate organizational change in the area of customized employment outcomes. The article presents seven points that emerged from their data review, which they conclude break down the barriers and achieve customized employment, outcome-driven change.

Luecking and his co-authors describe a partnership led by a local WIA provider in Maryland. They report on how the WIA sponsored One-Stop services have been adapted to serve people with significant disabilities as well as report on the employment outcomes achieved. The authors close with a discussion on the implications for future One-Stop access and employment service delivery for individuals with significant disabilities.

Finally, Rogers and his associates present the findings from their project, The Anoka County Transition

and Customized Employment Project (TCE). TCE was designed to inject an "employment first" philosophy into transition practices by introducing a range of customized employment strategies. The project formed a coalition in a Twin Cities suburban area of Minnesota and established an "interagency community of practice" to explore systems change opportunities and to improve school-to-career outcomes. Their article discusses the outcomes of young people enrolled in the project from seven autonomous school districts.

In total, these articles provide some of the first published reports on customized employment. The reader will gain a great deal of insight into the implementation of customized employment for individuals with disabilities. In addition, this special issue will provide a foundation upon which continued policy and research efforts can evolve.

References

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