A revolution in the employment process of individuals with disabilities: Customized employment as the catalyst for system change

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze a seven-year systems change effort focused on developing customized employment opportunities through a community rehabilitation program (CRP) that provides supports to persons with mental illness, developmental disabilities, and addictive diseases in Georgia. By using case studies and qualitative data, the path to real and effective organizational improvement in the area of customized employment outcomes is explored. Seven points of analysis on systematic organizational development emerged from the data review: (1) staff development; (2) community partnerships and diversified funding; (3) sustainability; (4) shift in managerial approaches and supervision; (5) changes in human resource processes; and (6) expanding customized employment to diverse populations; i.e. offenders, youth, welfare to work. This examination illustrates the need for: best practice staff training, person-centered and community-based vocational assessments, customer-directed personal budgets, flexible funding, focus on evidence-based customized employment outcomes as performance indicators, values-based human resource processes, CRP executive leadership involvement with staff and customers to break down barriers and achieve organizational momentum for outcome-driven change. Case studies for individuals who achieved customized employment outcomes are provided.

Keywords: Customized employment, job carving, job creation, job sharing, negotiation, organizational change, conversion, resource ownership, business within a business, self-employment, individual development accounts, individual training account, micro-loans, WIA one stop

1. Introduction

A person with a disability who needs supports often begins with a negative label and stands at risk of rejection, segregation, isolation and limited adult opportunities. While in our culture the notion of freedom is strongly tied to personal power, control and influence, many individuals with disabilities have been historically denied access to the opportunities for choice and decision-making necessary to experience becoming successful in what they wish to do with their lives. For many, disempowerment and dependency begins early and may continue long into adulthood. Typical scenarios may include: special education, separate busing, and child-like curricula often followed by traditional adult service systems, which may focus on congregate sheltered workshops and other programs. Individuals with disabilities must somehow fit into programs that frequently they have not chosen to participate in.

The most significant elements limiting expression of power and personal influence of people with disabilities may be the impairment/dependency attitudes of some interested supporters, traditional practice providers, and often society in general. Employment and val-

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ued community participation appear to be frontline solutions for undoing the disempowerment and dependency cycle for people with disabilities. Best practice community-based services and supports offer conditions where choice/decision making becomes fine-tuned, and where networks of support develop and personal growth opportunities occur naturally.

The challenge is for persons with disabilities and when appropriate families to work in concert with schools, support agencies, the business community and other stake holders to ensure quality community based outcomes. Expectations tend to be low regarding employment success for individuals with disabilities. Frequently there is encouragement toward a path of stereotypical employment options, if work is even a consideration. The support networks are often inadequate at best and fragmented with little emphasis being placed on a career path.

The Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards are public agencies in the state of Georgia created by law to provide mental health, developmental disability, and substance abuse services/supports. The organization provided support to over 14,000 individuals in 2006. The majority of funds utilized to provide services are generated through a contract with the state of Georgia, Medicaid and Medicare revenue, funding from Cobb County and Douglas County, Vocational Rehabilitation, grants, and private pay. The organizational goals include customer choice, community inclusion, work initiatives, and the expansion of the availability and access to natural community supports through the reduction of stigma.

In October 2001, the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards in collaboration with CobbWORKS!, the local Workforce Investment Act One-Stop Career Center, were awarded a Customized Employment Grant through the Department of Labor/ Office of Disability Employment Policy. This five year grant, titled Project Exceed, offered great opportunities for local collaboration with Edge Connection, the Cobb County micro-enterprise center, and the Cobb County Vocational Rehabilitation Services, as well as, at the state level with the Georgia Department of Labor, the Georgia Department of Education, and the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities. The Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards utilized the Customized Employment Grant to foster system change across all disability services and across the geographic region.

Customized employment (CE) as used in this paper is defined as: Individualizing the relationship between job seekers and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, requirements, and interests of a person and matching those to the needs of the employer (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2003). Customization is not new. Job seekers routinely consider the work environment, job characteristics, and other conditions they prefer in a job. Customized employment starts this process with up front negotiations between the job seeker and the employer

The methodologies of customizing a job include:

– job carving – creating a job from one or more but not all of the tasks of original job;
– job negotiation – creating a new job from various tasks from potentially parts of several jobs;
– job creation – creating a new job based on unmet workplace needs;
– job sharing – two or more people sharing the same job; and
– self employment, including use of a micro enterprise.

The specific goals for Project Exceed, the Customized Employment Grant received by the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards, included:

1. Serving 20 persons each year in accessing braided individual account dollars for customized employment.
2. Moving 20 persons with developmental disabilities out of the day program into customized employment.

The project was most successful in substantially exceeding these goals. Project Exceed served 198 individuals through accessing Individualized Account (IA) dollars via the Customized Employment Grant. Table 1 provides specific demographic data for the 198 grant participants.

Of the persons served, 105 individuals were female, 93 male. The predominant age range for persons served was 18–29. However, the age range extended through the full working age population, including 21 individuals who were age 50 and over. Predominant primary disabilities of persons served were Mental Illness (77) and Developmental Disability (85).

By project's conclusion a total of 141 project participants achieved employment outcomes. Employment outcomes were as follows:

– Number who utilized customized employment in a job in the competitive labor market where nego-

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of persons served by project exceed

Gender	Age	Disability Label*	Wage Range
Female: 105	18–29: 70	Mental Illness: 77	Lowest wage: $5.15 per hour
	30–39: 52	Developmental Disability: 85	Highest wage: $40 per hour
Male: 93	40–49: 55	Physical Disability: 36	Average wage: $8.00 per hour
	50 and over: 21	*Primary DX of addictive disease not included in grant	(Average number of hours worked was 15–20.)

tiation with the employer regarding job duties was critical to the successful placement: 73

– Number in self employment: 59
– Number in competitive employment using a supported employment approach where negotiating job duties in detail was not a critical support provided: 9

Table 1 also presents summary wage information for project participants who achieved employment outcomes. Average number of hours worked per employed participant was in the range of 15–20. The overall average hourly wage was $8.00 for project participants. Lowest wage was $5.15 per hour; highest wage was $40 per hour. Self-Employment earnings fluctuated more and have been difficult to quantify in an hourly format. On the average self-employed participants earned higher wages for their services. For instance, a person with his own computer repair business bills $40 per hour.

Project participants worked in a variety of different jobs. Examples of customized employment work settings, both for wage employment and self employment are as follows:

Wage Employment	Car detailer, Pet groomer, Receptionist, Teacher's assistant, Data Entry Technician, Child care worker, Book store employee, Hair Salon personnel, Chef, Embroiderer, Lab Technician.
Self-Employment	Arcade, Catering, Pest Extermination, Flea Market, Sales, Computer Technology, Motivational Speaking, Vending, Cleaners, Hair Salon, Jewelry, Lawn Care, Home Inspection

The remainder of this paper describes and analyzes the systems change effort afforded the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards through the Department of Labor/Office of Disability Employment Policy Customized Employment Grant. Six key organizational change factors are discussed in detail: (1) staff development; (2) community partnerships and diversified funding: (3) sustainability; (4) shift in managerial approaches and supervision; (5) changes in human resource processes; and (6) expanding customized employment to diverse populations; i.e. offenders, youth,

welfare to work. Issues faced in the organizational development process are described. Case studies are also provided describing the employment supports provided to two Project Exceed participants who achieved successful customized employment outcomes.

2. Components of a systematic organizational change effort

2.1. Staff development

At the Cobb and Douglas Community Services Boards, the training budget, like so many in the field, was tight and finite. In analyzing how to best use the dollars, the key leadership staff decided on taking a low-cost, hands-on approach, using the input and direction of the agency's leaders, that would produce increases in the overall staff knowledge base. Over the course of one year, the best-practice books on supported employment, self-employment, transition from school-to-work, and closing day programs were purchased. Book club discussions led to new skill acquisition. This approach met the needs of staff, and provided a baseline of technical skill, which could be built upon as the agency moved deeper into providing CE supports. Since the key departmental leaders directed the book discussions, the material could be tailored to fit specific staff needs, and at the same time offered opportunities for self-study and interactive learning. Additionally, by sponsoring the initiative, the leadership of the agency sent the message that the material was important to read and to discuss in planning for next steps.

More and more organizations are looking to e-learning as the most efficient, cost effective way to deliver new learning to staff [1]. After an exhaustive search that included both human service agencies and private sector companies, the CSB decided to pursue the On-Line Job Coach Certification course offered by the Human Service Management Institute at the University of Georgia. This nine month professional course allowed the staff who excelled and thoroughly participated in the book club discussions to take their learning

Table 2
Chronological explanation of staff development steps and resources

2001	Year long book discussions, using *Supported Employment Handbook: A Customer Driven Approach for People with Significant Disabilities* (Valerie Brooke); *Supported Employment in Business: Expanding the Capacity of Workers with Disabilities* (Paul Wehman); *Closing the Shop* (Pat Rogan); The vocational profile: An alternative to traditional evaluation. (Michael Callahan)
2002	Strategic application of *APSE Ethical Guidelines*. During staff meeting, each guideline was reviewed, discussed and applied to every day work scenarios. This approach ensured practical application to core value-driven principles.
2003	First group of job coach staff enrolled in the *On-Line Job Coach Certification* taught through the *Human Services Management Institute* at the *University of Georgia*. Continued book study utilizing *Making Self Employment Work for People with Disabilities* (Cary Griffin)
2004	Intra-agency training provided by highlighting CE outcomes achieved. Leadership staff along with the job coaches responsible for the outcomes provided training to staff using Power Point presentations and when available families and customers assisted.
2005	To push best-practice training across agency departments, staff enrolled in the on-line course, *Supported Competitive Employment for Individuals with Mental Illnes*s, through *Virginia Commonwealth University's RRTC on Workplace Supports and Job Retention*
2006	Additional staff in the areas of the agency not traditionally viewed as providing employment services (i.e. residential, case management, day program and administrative) were enrolled in the on-line courses and/or participated in the book club and *APSE Ethical Guidelines* discussions.

to a higher level. Key managers also took the course simultaneously with the staff they supervised, reiterating that the information was important for all to learn. With weekly homework assignments and bulletin board discussions, staff was also given time and resources throughout the week to complete the assigned work. In all, 20 job coaches completed the training and received certificates from the University of Georgia in the first year.

The acquisition of new skill sets provided yet another opportunity for the leadership to standardize staff's baseline training needs, and move forward with even more customized training. Table 2 is a chronological explanation of the steps followed in staff development.

Clearly staff development is an on-going concern. To ensure that only best-practice, evidence-based methods are at the forefront, a provider needs to be fully engaged in reading, collaborating and pursuing the most up-to-date training for staff. To this end, the CSB has incorporated staff development as a key area under its strategic plan.

2.2. Community partnerships and diversified funding

To increase the efficiency of obtaining quality community based outcomes, networks with the business community were developed. Community partnerships can develop across a variety of situations, such as creation of a local business network or a partnership focused on meeting the individualized support needs of a specific customer. For example, staff created connections to the business and social networks in a small community served by the CSB by forming a collaborative partnership among 12 small business owners. This partnership put into place a network of businesses that employment support staff could use in determining

who in that community would be key to helping find employment based on each individual customer's vocational profile and stated work goals. The network has worked extremely well. Now participants call on one another as needed regarding employment opportunities available through their businesses, and staff call on the business owners to identify potential job leads.

Also, a partnership was created with the local micro-enterprise center, The Edge Connection. This partnership supports customized employment by facilitating access to creative funding sources. The local United Way provides funding managed by the micro enterprise center for Individual Development Account (IDA) micro-loans to support individual employment objectives. The partnership agreement with the micro-enterprise center facilitates access to the IDA micro-loans, grants for high-speed Internet access, and other technology grants to bridge the digital divide. Seven Project Exceed participants received IDA Account micro-loans.

Individual Training Account (ITA) funds through the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) were also used in partnership with the local One Stop Career Center to support customized employment outcomes. WIA ITAs were accessed for 13 project participants. Project Exceed staff worked on developing this partnership from several standpoints. First, they co-located staff in the One-Stop and attended the One-Stop's planning and management meetings regularly. Second, they worked with many customers referred by the One-Stop. One example is a customer who came to the One Stop after high-school in search of a path alternative to the recommended VR services. This young man used his WIA ITA to pay for A+ Certification training at a local technical college. A+ certification is a certification documenting your ability to de-assemble and reassem-

Table 3

WIA ITA	Grant ITA	IDA	Micro Loans	Agency Loans	VR	PASS	Medicaid WAIVER
Training courses:	Equipment for business	Business start-up needs:	equipment	Business rent	Supplies	vehicle	Day supports converted
A+ certification	Marketing materials	Equipment	Business rent	Car payments	Assessment	insurance	SE supports
MOUS Certification	Supported education	supplies		Essential equipment	equipment		
	Personal care	marketing		Home expenses	Taxi transit		

ble computers for repair. It is a basic level training in the field of computer repair. Because of learning disabilities, he used grant-funded Individualized Account dollars to purchase tutoring time with the class instructor each week after class. He also benefited from the accommodation of being able to audit the A+ class once after completion of his enrollment in order to review the content again. He received training as Microsoft Office User Specialist (MOUS), which is training on Microsoft Office Package Software. WIA services also engaged VR to support job development services through a local CRP, and a customized resource ownership situation was pursued with the support of an Employment Specialist. The total braided funding package for this young man involved Individual Training Account funds through both the One Stop and the Project Exceed grant funds; an Individual Development Account; Micro Loans; Agency Loans; Vocational Rehabilitation; Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS) through the Social Security Administration; and Medicaid Waiver, used as in Table 3.

Vocational Rehabilitation, One Stop Career Centers, and provider agencies that support individuals with a disability are generally familiar resources. Approximately 75% of Project Exceed participants utilized services through the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. One resource that is less familiar to some is the Micro Enterprise Center. These Centers started out as a grass-roots economic development initiative. In Georgia, United Way, as well as other foundations and endowments such as Hewlett-Packard, which funded a computer lab for our Micro Enterprise Center, fund Micro Enterprise Centers. Micro-loans can be provided by these Centers and are usually in the neighborhood of $2,000 to $3,000, but certainly can vary. These Micro Enterprise Centers vary from state to state, so it is important that people get to know how a Center operates in their own state.

Some of the other financial options that Cobb-Douglas Counties CSBs have used include:

– Provider Short Term-Loans
– Individual Training Accounts and Individual Development Accounts

– PASS Plans
– Family Contributions and Donated Funds

Provider short-term loans are an option that Cobb and Douglas Counties CSBs use to assist our customers with start-up costs in starting their own businesses or to purchase a resource. The loans come from donated funds, flexible dollars, and/or endowments and foundations. The loans generally total $1,000 to $3,000, and there is no interest charged to the person. Our customers pay back the loans over a period of time, usually 18 to 24 months. These loans give more flexibility to the customers to be able to get what they need to achieve the outcomes that have been identified as their goals.

Cobb and Douglas Counties CSBs have provided loans to three Project Exceed participants. An example of a business supported through the short-term no-cost loan is an individual who received a loan to have the Georgia driver's manual translated into Spanish. That was a resource lacking in the State, and Georgia has a growing Hispanic community. Loan funds were used for supplies and for printing the translated manual. One individual started his own synthetic oil business; another started a lawn care business. Loan funds were used to purchase start-up supplies and equipment needed to operate the businesses.

2.3. Sustainability

Sustainability of Customized Employment, regardless of which form it may take (job carving, resource ownership, or self-employment, etc.), is a crucial element to consider when planning for the longevity of supports. The avenues toward vigorous sustainability, that is, how to keep CE as an on-going option for people with disabilities, is as diverse as the providers, families, employers and funders that make up the communities where the CE is taking place. For this reason, the following methods are by no means exhaustive and should not be studied as an end-all to the possible ways of sustaining CE efforts, but rather as a jumping off point, a starting line for even more creative solutions. Given the core customized employment principle that

each person's CE outcome should be individualized, so too should each funding braid be tailored to fit the unique benefits, goals and challenges specific to the focus person's employment scenario.

Sustainability comes in two central forms: 1) provider sustainability and 2) individual sustainability. Agencies that work with people with disabilities to secure meaningful, long-lasting employment should always be thinking about how to find, secure and utilize new and unfettered funding sources. These types of funds can be found through charitable donations, foundation dollars, demonstration grants, local businesses, fundraisers, and through working with existing funders to modify polices and procedures in an effort to reduce the barriers for persons with disabilities to access funds for the pursuit of Customized Employment. This strategy of becoming fully aware of such resources requires the provider agency's governing body to commit its resources and time to this endeavor, and it certainly means that all energies be focused on communicating these needs to the community at large.

The second prong of sustainability, which is focused on the individual, represents the customized efforts, tailored supports and continuous planning on behalf of a person engaged in the pursuit of Customized Employment. Unlike provider sustainability, which is necessary, but normally focuses on dollars for staffing, training and on-going programmatic financial needs, individual sustainability efforts are specific to the focus person's employment needs, and likely are solved by the use of a Customized Employment Team, made up of friends, family, provider staff, and funding personnel. By paying attention to these distinctions between provider sustainability and individual sustainability, both can receive the proper attention. Table 4 provides numerous examples of options for improving sustainability.

2.4. Shift in managerial approaches and supervision

Concurrent with a greater emphasis on staff training and development, the organizational structure at the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards was flattened. Staff was offered opportunities to assume different support roles based on their interests and skill sets, utilizing the same Customized Employment values of building on strengths rather than deficits that support people with disabilities. For example, if a staff person was "well connected in her community," and knew how to locate resources, she was supported in utilizing her strengths and given a role

within the team that focused on resource development, including job creation and social capital building. Self-directed work teams were formed with staff assuming more employment related roles. Employment was seen as achievable for all customers, and continuing to share CE success stories reinforced this value. Goal development was customer driven and determined by the individual's passions. Person centered planning determined how staff turned these passions into customized employment outcomes.

Attention to a number of specific management factors is essential to the success of the system change and the inevitable shift in managerial focus. These factors include garnering leadership support; empowering direct-support staff "to get out of the buildings" and into the community with individual customers; focusing on strengths; and assuring quality, customized outcomes, rather than traditional, stereotypical employment outcomes. To obtain these essential system change key ingredients, the CEO of the Cobb and Douglas Counties CSBs provided ample opportunities for Board members, community businesses, families and customers, and other human service agencies to experience the successes of CE. Press releases, presentations, feature stories in trade journals and newspapers, and news pieces on public radio and local news affiliates all contributed to a greater sense of buy-in and helped change the community's and staff's view of the essential mission of the agency.

In addition, the key leadership set up weekly Customized Employment Team meetings. These interactive, problem solving sessions are highly creative, and based on the principles of openness and inclusion. The meetings employ an "open invitation" forum, which means any staff person can invite an employer, customer, family member, community stakeholder etc. to problem solve around any issue that is a barrier for a person achieving his or her CE dream job. Leadership staff made it a priority to attend these meetings and provide facilitation and support, as well as, working as collaborators to move the individual CE process forward. In this way, the development of CE employment outcomes became a tangible, results-oriented effort, eliminating the traditional "staffings" that sometimes occur in human service settings.

Program managers were charged with supervising staff in new ways, allowing for more flexibility with work schedules, while paying greater attention to the job coach's achieved outcomes. For this non-traditional approach to managing staff to succeed, leadership at all levels had to engage in an ever-present review of

Table 4
Strategies for Improving Sustainability of Values-Drive

Funding option	Strategies for improving sustainability
Provider micro-loans	– A provider agency meets with its governing board with a plan to use donated funds for micro-loans for the pursuit of CE. – Loans are backed by the sponsoring provider and are either no-cost or very low interest. – Return on investment outcome indicators are tracked to illustrate best-practice (i.e. purchasing power, the extent that the self-employment or CE has created economic development via local and state taxes generated, and the manner in which the scenario has met both the employee and employers needs) – Loans are utilized as "centers of funding leverage" that is, the dollars are put up front to secure other funds for the individual.
Student-Driven Flexible Fund	– Family and focus person set up an account much like a college fund, saving and planning with other funders (VR, SSA, Medicaid) on how best to utilize the entire braided funding package. – Spend down issues, resource limits and impact of future and current services are discussed openly by the CE team. – The team surrounding the focus person utilizes the principles of self-determination, person-centered planning, and choice all the while acting as micro-boards. (www.microboards.org) – Tying capital to future employment goals has a "viral effect." Other more traditional human service funders tend to respond positively and may feel they are not the only funding stream on the hook for an advantageous outcome.
Individual Development Account	– Administered in each state differently, but usually require matched dollars from the individual. 1 to 3 is a typical match requirement. – IDAs are set up to "capitalize" people living in poverty, either through home ownership or self-employment. – While very beneficial to many people with disabilities, one should be prepared for some paperwork. – IDAs are already in existence in many states. Asset building is an anti-poverty strategy that helps low-income people move toward greater self-sufficiency by purchasing long-term assets. Examples of long-term assets include a home, higher education and training, and a business. These accounts represent both categories of sustainability (agency and individual) Therefore, IDAs are a good tool to explore. More information may be found at: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/assetbuilding/index.html

their critical values such as commitment to continual self-examination, faith in organizational restructuring/strong leadership, focusing on blending resources, and spotlighting outcome-based stories

2.5. Human resource processes

After collaborating with current staff to understand their strengths and what part of the CE process they would be most suited for, the task of re-working how the CSB went about finding and hiring new staff was the next area of concentration. In the past, applicants were found through more traditional sources. People came to the agency from having worked in day programs, institutions, and other human service type jobs. For the most part, the average applicant had many years of working with people with disabilities, but lacked the type of creativity, enthusiasm for systems change and commitment to civil rights and social justice the leadership staff was looking for.

To address this issue, the CE team met to discuss how best to tap into the type of energetic employee needed to keep the systems change effort moving forward. Three areas of improvement were identified: 1) a bet-

ter advertisement mechanism for job openings focused on tapping a more non-traditional pool of applicants; 2) An interview tool that employed a stronger values-driven approach; 3) A selection process that utilized the expertise of current staff.

2.5.1. Advertisement of job openings

The leadership of the CSB decided upon using arts magazines and newspapers to advertise job openings rather than just utilizing the local daily newspapers. In addition, current staff was asked to put the word out about the position and were reassured their recommended candidates would be interviewed. Relationships with the local university were also created, which allowed for individual professors to recommend a certain student for consideration. Lastly, employers who had shown a great commitment to CE were also asked to spread the word, often referring family members and friends who already understood the dynamic approach CE offered both the employer and the person with a disability.

2.5.2. An improved interview tool

Instead of relying upon an outdated list of interview questions centered on very traditional inquiries,

the leadership staff created the Values-Based Interview Questionnaire, which delves into the applicant's view on civil rights and social justice, economic self-sufficiency, and creative problem solving. This tool allows for leadership staff and current direct support personnel included in the interviewing process to gauge an applicant's fit into the CSB work culture. The result has been a more streamlined interviewing process, with greater selection results. Turnover dropped from a high of nearly 25% in 2001 to less than 2% in 2005.

2.5.3. Improved selection process

Interviewing, as mentioned above, become not the sole responsibility of the leadership staff but incorporated the "high-achievers," i.e. staff who had shown great commitment to the systems change cause and who had produced many excellent CE outcomes. The result was two-fold: staff felt motivated and rewarded because their expertise was being acknowledged, and the interview process became much more interactive, with the second interview round applicants visiting job sites, shadowing key staff and meeting customers.

Aligning HR practices within a system change effort where flux, creativity, and outcome-driven chaos are the norm, is clearly an essential step in forming the foundation for even greater change. Without this crucial component, providers will find themselves tied to an outdated process for finding the staff needed to create sustained momentum.

2.6. Expanding customized employment to diverse populations

A very important by-product of the success of CE at the Cobb and Douglas Counties CSBs was the opportunity to incorporate the methodology into other areas of service. Strategic discussions occurred at the CEO level about how best to take the lessons learned from pursing CE for people with developmental disabilities and severe mental illnesses and utilize the concept and practices within an even broader demographic. To start, every service line was reviewed to determine the applicability of CE within the department. Three areas of concentration emerged, and leadership staff decided to focus on: 1) Adolescent services; 2) Prison and jail outreach services; and 3) Recipients of Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF).

Staff from each focus area reviewed the central concepts of CE. Stakeholders and staff received training in self-employment, customer-driven outcomes and how to connect with employers. Next, all current grants and Request for Proposals in the focus areas were reviewed to determine if CE could be written into the formal grant application. Two funding opportunities did present themselves, one for adolescents with substance abuse issues and another for prison and jail populations. Grant projects were written using success stories, data findings, demographics and key CE building blocks. In the end, over $500,000 dollars were secured to begin using the principles of CE and self-employment with these two populations.

In making decisions about expanding the focus on customized employment across multiple program areas, leadership staff at the CSB, using its core values, pursued the application of CE by examining the needs, barriers and opportunities present in the funding environment. Any provider agency interested in utilizing CE as an avenue toward greater self-sufficiency and the acquisition of capital must thoughtfully think through a variety of variables. The effort should involve stakeholders, board members, staff, other agencies involved in support delivery and current funders. By doing so, CE can be utilized with virtually any population of people who suffer from chronic unemployment and the stigmatizing forces of poverty.

3. Two case studies exemplifying customized employment outcomes

3.1. Chris's story – Growing a business through collaborative funding

Christopher Williams owns Zydeco Janitorial Services. Christopher started this business with funding from Project Exceed, the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services, and the Cobb Micro Enterprise Center in Cobb County, Georgia. Chris found Project Exceed through a referral from his VR counselor who recognized in Chris the entrepreneurial spirit that motivated him to run such a successful business.

Chris's first step was to enroll in the 12 week business plan development course at Cobb micro enterprise center. While this step should not be a prerequisite for folks starting businesses, it made sense in Chris' case. Chris continues to access the expertise of Cobb Micro Enterprise Center's consultants. For example, he has, with the support of their marketing consultant, developed marketing materials for his business, including a brochure and business cards. The lawyer on staff at this organization supported Chris in developing a contract to use with his customers. Because Chris' developmental

disability impacts his learning, specifically reading and writing, Chris approached the class through a supported education model in which his customized employment broker attended the class with him and provided the additional support that Chris needed. Now, a year after Chris' graduation, he continues to attend monthly alumni meetings to network with entrepreneurs from all over the metro Atlanta area who have graduated from this training over the past 5 years of its existence.

Before Chris found Project Exceed, he worked at wage jobs for the most part in janitorial positions. He attended a high school special education program and through the school system's transition to work services, Christopher worked in summer programs through the adult rehabilitation program at Tommy Nobis Center. Chris worked after graduation at the Air Force Reserve Base and in a retail setting in janitorial services.

Today, in running his own business, Chris negotiates contracts with customers, performs the work, orders maintenance supplies and equipment, and transports himself to each job site. Chris hired an accountant to keep his books and occasionally hires family members to assist with large contracts. Recently Chris has considered purchasing a franchise. Owning a franchise might allow him access to customer referrals and lessen the negotiation responsibilities in daily business operations. Chris has access under the Customized Employment Project to an Individual Training Account or ITA that would fund this franchise and relieve him of the negotiation and bidding work he cares little for.

Being a business owner allows Chris to connect socially and professionally with various people in his community. Chris visits the local One Stop Center regularly, where he gets rehabilitation assistance, and where he has created for himself a mentor relationship with a staff person also owns a small cleaning business. This mentor has been a resource for Chris as he's made decisions about what equipment to purchase and negotiating potential contracts.

Through his ITA funded by PROJECT EXCEED, CobbWorks! One-Stop, Cobb Micro Enterprise Center, and the Tommy Nobis Center, Inc, Chris purchased a carpet cleaner, a floor buffer, an industrial vacuum and many cleaning supplies, as well as marketing materials and other professional services. At this time Chris is working closely with his vocational rehabilitation counselor as they review his business plan for funding. He is hopeful that they will invest in his current success and help him expand his business.

3.2. Laura McClure – The icing on her life thus far . . .

Laura McClure works at the crack of dawn. She wakes early and travels to the bakery shop 2 to 3 times a week. Laura owns a small shop within the store where she sells chocolates, treats, small games and trinkets. Before Laura opened her own shop, she was hired by owner and operator, Lisa, to bake pastries. Laura brought with her to her new job a love of baking, a pride about the responsibilities to be precise and learn each pastry recipe process and has now gained particular mastery of cookies.

This desert shop, as is the case with many small businesses, is undercapitalized. It would benefit from serving customers espresso. Laura had resources through the Customized Employment Project, needed a job, and loves coffee. Fusing the two circumstances resulted in a resource ownership approach that improved customer service and profitability for the company and customized a desired position of importance for Laura. So, Laura offered, as resource ownership, to bring with her to her wage job a state-of- the- art espresso maker to be installed in the shop. Laura and Lisa share an interest in coffee and Laura had the skills to learn to run this machine.

Resource Ownership is an approach to employment that allows the applicant or employee to offer something of use to the business much in the same way that a college degree might be offered as a symbolic representation of valuable skills [6]. Much like a degree, Laura maintains ownership of the espresso maker and if she wanted to change her employment situation, she could take her resource with her. The espresso maker was a hefty undertaking for the business as it required major electrical and plumbing expansion for the shop's space but resulted in a significant expansion of services for the small pastry shop which is now also a coffee shop! For Laura, this unique situation has resulted in income from weekly wages for operating the espresso maker and baking with Lisa, as well as self-employment income from running her own business inside the host business.

Laura receives on-going supports on-site from the owner and co-workers which sustain her situation. A majority of these natural supports developed through her wonderful connection with her employer. Laura has received systematic instruction in compiling ingredients for recipes. She will, over time, gain mastery of the Italian espresso maker. Her boss, Lisa, helps her price the items in her shop, keeps track of inventory on

Laura's behalf, and assists in the calculation costs and profit.

Today, Laura is excited about waking at 6 am. She enjoys working at the shop. She speaks with great pride about the pastries creates. Laura also reports the positive effects of working on other aspects of her life. Most salient is Laura's interest in studying to complete her Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) in order to achieve the High School diploma she never received. She also is excited about pursuing culinary arts training specifically in confectionary baking. In order to pursue these dreams Laura will apply for supported education so she can either have one-on-one instruction or the one-on-one support of someone during and following class-time.

It was through the innovative and flexible Individual Training Account (ITA) provided by the U.S. Dept. of Labor funded Project Exceed that she was able to purchase the espresso machine, the start-up supplies for her candy shop, and floor space for the shop. The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation Services supported the purchase of chef's clothing and shoes for use on the job. Most recently, Laura has paid tuition with her ITA through Project Exceed for a cake decorating course. PROJECT EXCEED is a collaboration of the Cobb Community Services Board, CobbWorks! Workforce Investment System, Cobb Micro Enterprise Center, and the Tommy Nobis Center, Inc

4. Issues experiencied during organizational change

Within the Workforce Investment Act policies, both locally and federally, there are many well-known challenges in serving customers with disabilities. The most common barriers the CSB experienced were those surrounding the outcome requirements for WIA, specifically the requirement to enter and maintain full-time employment. This requirement does not allow for the degree of customization ideal for many customers.

Within the Vocational Rehabilitation system, a great many local policies have been barriers, a majority of those merit federal change. Most relevant to the Project Exceeds' work are those policies around both assessment and self-employment. Dollars spent by VR on traditional/facility-based assessment and work adjustment need to be directed, by formal federal policy directive, towards community based one-on-one vocational profiling. The time of "work-adjustment" as a measure of a person's ability is long gone as an accept-

able practice when it comes to dependable information in relation to customizing jobs.

Entrepreneurship as a national trend is evidenced by the widespread response to Carl Shramm's book, *"The Entrepreneurial Imperative: How America's Economic Miracle Will Reshape the World (and Change Your Life)"* which argues the necessity of micro enterprise development for our nation to thrive [9]. Muhammad Yunus, recent Nobel Prize winner and founder of the Grameen Bank, champions micro lending as a solution to poverty around the world [14]. With many customers of Project Exceed thriving in true micro enterprise situations, it is difficult to watch VR policy move towards more stringent policies around self-employment that limit access to this viable outcome. While the project's demonstration built excellent rapport locally so that individual VR counselors felt comfortable supporting self-employment goals, the State VR agency wrote and introduced a more strict policy, which re-emphasized the already challenging value of expecting any entrepreneur to be able to write a business plan independently. The policy also reduced funding amounts and increased associated evaluation steps to determine eligibility for a self-employment work goal. It would have an impressive impact on Customized Employment's viability as a national practice to have RSA write federal policy, which supports micro-enterprise as a work goal for all customers regardless of complexity or label. VR self-employment policy needs to recognize the imperative need for flexible business planning and implementation models as well access to capitol for start-up in a timely fashion. A similar mandate from Vocational Rehabilitation on providing ready access to funding for resource ownership within guidelines governing purchase of Tools and Equipment could put into place a more statewide policy that local counselors found made sense after a great deal of relationship building.

The Community Services Board has entirely self-directed leeway to change internal policies necessary to support Customized Employment and as such encountered few internal barriers. Those ongoing challenges exist with in the Federal Medicaid and Social Security systems where recipients of these services still struggle to balance complex systems of very necessary services with the need and desire to introduce earned income and work responsibilities into that web. Social Security Work Incentives offer a great number of valuable tools for balancing earned income with medical and cash benefits. Still however, many barriers exist. The Work Incentives are very supportive of self-

employment for beneficiaries receiving SSI but create some insurmountable challenges for people receiving SSDI. In the Developmental Disabilities system, Medicaid Waivers frequently offer home or day support services insufficient to support true community involvement. Social Security and Medicaid Waiver policies have a definite impact on the national viability of customized employment implementation.

5. Conclusion

The experience of the Cobb and Douglas Counties Community Services Boards in Georgia in shifting from a segregated traditional service system to an innovative system focusing on economic development for persons with disabilities illustrates some common aspects of system change. Staff development, managerial approaches and supervision, and alignment of human resource processes must be thoughtfully planned for if the system change is to be effective. Time spent in exploring community connections that may lead to new and non-traditional funding can be very valuable in freeing up monies to assist customers in obtaining employment resources that will empower him/her in the job market. Using one's connections to build social capital is an effective methodology to provide momentum to achieving outcomes. There are creative processes the organization can implement in the area of sustainability and funding that are explained in this paper.

Critical to continuing this organization's system change has been an on-going emphasis on best practice implementation in a number of areas. These include staff training, person-centered and community-based vocational assessments, customer-directed personal budgets, flexible funding, focus on evidence-based customized employment outcomes as performance indicators, values-based human resource processes, and executive leadership involvement with staff and customers to break down barriers and achieve organizational momentum for outcome-driven change.

Lastly, the methodology of customizing a job is applicable to any employment situation. Simply put, it is human resource management at its best and most effective. It is not a process driven by disability. Customizing employment ensures a good job match for the individual since it begins with the focus person's passion. When an individual is engaged in economic pursuits of their interests there, is assurance that both the employee and employer benefit.

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