

CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT DEMONSTRATION PROJECT – QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. What is customized employment?

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 assessment of the strengths, needs, and interests of the person with a disability. It is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer.

It may include employment developed through self-employment or entrepreneurial initiatives. It can include job carving, which involves identifying individuals' job-related strengths and carving out a niche position that reflects their skills and fulfills an employer's needs. It can also involve 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.

2. What are the fundamental principles of customized employment?

- identifies specific job duties or employer expectations that are negotiated with employers
- targets individualized job goals to negotiate based on the needs, strengths, and interests of the employment seeker
- meets the unique needs of the employment seeker and employer
- starts with the individual as the source of information for exploring potential employment options
- offers representation, as needed, for employment seekers to assist in negotiating with employers
- occurs in integrated, non-congregate environments in the community or in a business alongside people who do not have disabilities
- results in at least minimum wage
- creates employment through self-employment and/or business ownership
- facilitates an amalgam of supports and funding sources

3. Is customized employment just a new name for supported employment?

Customized employment is a refinement of supported employment, but varies in important ways.

In customized employment, the first step is getting to know the employment seeker without preconceived ideas of appropriate work or what is typically available in the local job market. Once the person's needs, wants and goals are understood, then work can be explored based on the person's interests, skills, and strengths.

The job search process in a supported employment model is largely driven by what jobs are available, advertised, or easy to find in that community or region. There is a reliance on a labour market approach that impacts the kinds of jobs sought for people with disabilities, hence the high proportion of food service, custodial, and high-turnover jobs.

In customized employment, situations are sought that meet the needs of the individual, and a negotiation follows that melds the desires of the worker while simultaneously meeting the needs of the employer.

Customized employment counteracts the approach of filling available jobs and instead uses discovery of the individual as the driving force in a job creation process, and seeks to create mutually beneficial employment relationships.

Customized employment is specifically individualized and accepts commensurate wages only, in integrated settings. Supported employment, on the other hand, makes allowances for group settings such as mobile crews and enclaves, where sub-minimum wages may be paid.

Customized employment also includes business ownership.

4. What is a customized job?

A customized job is a set of tasks that differ from the employer's standard job descriptions. Instead, the description is based on tasks that are found within that workplace. A customized proposal unites the tasks that exist in a workplace and rearranges them in a customized job description.

For example, the customized job may include only a subset of the tasks from one of the employer's job descriptions or a mix of tasks taken from several existing job descriptions. It may include new tasks that are not currently being performed but fill a need for the employer. The customizing process often causes the employer to think of existing tasks in a new way.

For self-employment, the customized job would be based on tasks to be performed by the individual in the business, including any accommodations or disability-related assistance the individual may need.

5. Is customized employment real employment?

Yes. Customized employment is real work for real pay. It is based on identifying tasks that an employer needs done to effectively conduct his or her business and matching those to the job candidate's abilities and interests.

Many jobs today don't fit into the traditional nine to five workday or don't necessarily need to be performed in the employer's workplace. Further, workers are requesting more autonomy, freedom, and customization of the conditions of their employment. The work world is changing to merge the requests of the new workplace and the needs of the workforce.

6. How does one get to know the employment seeker?

The most widely used process is called *discovery*ⁱ. Discovery is not planning, it is an information gathering process that seeks to answer the questions "who is this person?" and "what are the ideal conditions of employment?"

The process most often starts at home and includes an inventory of the surrounding neighbourhood. As transportation and natural supports are an on-going employment and inclusion issue, it makes sense to look for interests, and subsequently, opportunities nearby. It expands to places where interests can be explored through informational interviews, paid work experiences, or engagement in social activities.

During discovery, the customized employment team, employment specialist, employment seeker, family member and whoever else is involved is not actually looking for employment for the individual. Multiple employment directions should be revealed, not a job description, but rather vocational interests and a revealing of skills that are used to create employment in the community.

7. Wouldn't a standardized vocational evaluation be more accurate than discovery?

Standardized vocational evaluation has not been proven to predict employment success. The discovery process witnesses an individual's needs, skills, desires, interests, and contributions in real community environments. This approach is much more functional, and therefore more cost effective, than traditional assessment approaches which often screen people out of employment services.

Additionally, in Employment Program for Persons with Disabilities (EPPD) consultations, many spoke about a reduced reliance on formal assessments and a better understanding of the individual before work situations are sought. As this is a demonstration project, based on the principles of customized employment, the discovery process will be more fully evaluated.

8. Wouldn't it be easier for an individual with significant disabilities to learn skills before they are placed in community jobs?

There isn't any data that fully demonstrates that working in a facility-based program is a pre-requisite to community employment. Research shows that individuals with significant disabilities have difficulty transferring or generalizing skills learned in one environment to another. Agency staff could spend time teaching a work skill such as staying on task in the workshop, but the person may not transfer this skill to a work setting. Time would then be needed to train the person to successfully demonstrate skills in the community business that had already been trained in the facility.

Part of the challenge with transferring skills also can be related to the difficulty simulating the characteristics of a community business in the facility-based program. This could include the presence or absence of environmental conditions such as noise, amount of space, objects, customers, co-workers, and the demands of community employment. Teaching the individual to work at his or her job site of choice, rather than withholding access to the community until skills are learned, is the best approach.

9. How does customized employment fit into today's labour market?

It appears that the unemployment rate for people with disabilities had remained relatively unchanged over the past 10 years, despite an overall increase in new jobs. The labour market has almost no impact on the employment rate of people with significant disabilities. It is the will of leadership at all levels to make employment a priority that will make an impact in the long run, as the money, technology, and employment opportunities exist.

Customized employment recognizes that there is always room in a company for people who match the culture and values of the company and can perform work needed by the company, which will create a profit for the company.

10. How do you identify potential employers?

Potential employers can be identified by looking for a match between the job candidate's expressed interests and skills and the nature of an employer's business. The person with a disability should be asked about employers he or she knows and those that family, friends and neighbours know. Other employers can be identified through the business section of the local paper, local business associations or through community knowledge of the job developer.

The initial survey of potential employers should be broad and include any employer who might have one or more of the proposed tasks performed or needed in their business or who might have a suitable environment for the candidate.

11. How will potential employers and co-workers provide the needed support and supervision for an individual with a significant disability?

The employment seeker needs to look for companies that provide consistent support and supervision to all workers, not just workers with disabilities. If an individual with intensive support needs is placed in a work environment where all workers receive minimal or no supervision, they may have some challenges.

They also need to look for work sites where co-workers or supervisors would be in close proximity to the worker with a significant disability. Talk with the employer about how the individual could receive positive feedback when co-workers walk past the individual's work area. Employment specialists can help by observing and determining naturally occurring times of the day when co-workers are available to provide support. As previously mentioned, the individual also needs to learn how to monitor his or her work performance.

The goal is to determine how the employer and co-workers can assist the individual from the first day of employment, rather than creating dependence on the employment specialist.

12. What is involved in voluntary negotiations with employers?

Once an employer has agreed to discuss an individualized job description for the candidate, the agent or developer will present the job proposal. This must include a task or tasks that the employer recognizes as adding value to his or her business. The employer may accept the proposal, discuss modifications to it, or reject it.

If the original proposal is not accepted, a discussion with the employer may result in a different job description that is satisfactory to both the employer and the applicant. If no agreement can be reached, the agent or job developer should consider approaching other employers. Negotiation strategies may include job carving, self-employment, or other job development or restructuring strategies.

Customized employment assumes the provision of reasonable accommodations and supports necessary for the individual to perform the functions of the negotiated job. Reasonable accommodation is any change or adjustment to a job or work environment that permits a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the job application process, to perform the essential functions of a job, or to enjoy benefits and privileges of employment equal to those enjoyed by employees without disabilities.

13. Is it necessary to reveal the individual's disability during negotiations?

It is helpful, but not essential, since one of the main ingredients in customized employment is negotiation. Voluntary disclosure, authorized by the job candidate, allows the employer to understand why the job developer may want to customize a job description on behalf of an individual. The disclosure must be a voluntary act by the job candidate, who must give clear authority to disclose the disability during the negotiations with employers. The permission should be in writing. This guidance is limited to the implementation of customized employment strategies.

14. What are the quality indicators of customized employment?

The following indicators must be present in order for a process to be considered customized employment:

- Processes and procedures are in place to ensure individuals select their own job and work conditions
 - The employee has a personalized job description and/or other employer expectations that did not exist prior to the negotiation process.
 - An array of strategies is used that allow job duties to be tailored to satisfy both job seeker and employer needs.
 - There are opportunities for personal representation by a job developer, as appropriate, to assist the job seeker in negotiating with employers.
- A well co-ordinated job retention system in place with co-worker and job coach staff providing supports as needed
- All individually designed services and supports needed by the individual for success are offered by the employer, the workforce system, and/or funders of services.
- Natural supports are in place
- The individual makes a tangible contribution to the employer's enterprise
- The individual is hired and paid directly by the employer
- Employer satisfaction
- People with significant disabilities are employed
- Data tracking verifies that people are actually working and outcomes (including wages, hours worked, etc.) are occurring

15. Where can I find more information on Customized Employment?

The following websites may provide more information on customized employment.

The University of Montana Rural Institute

The University of Montana Rural Institute has been a leader in the area of transition planning for youth with disabilities since 1995. www.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/transition

The National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult

The National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult provides training, technical assistance, policy analysis, and information to improve access for all in the workforce development system.

www.onestops.info

Office of Disability Employment Policy

The Office of Disability Employment Policy provides national leadership by developing and influencing disability-related employment policy and practice affecting the employment of people with disabilities.

www.dol.gov/odep

Worksupport.com

The purpose of the Virginia Commonwealth University RRTC on Workplace Supports and Job Retention is to study those supports that are most effective for assisting individuals with disabilities maintain employment and advance their careers. www.worksupport.com

Training and Technical Assistance for Providers

A website that focuses on customized employment. www.t-tap.org

WorkWORLD

WorkWORLD™ is decision support software for personal computers designed to help people with disabilities, advocates, benefit counsellors, and others explore and understand how to best use the work incentives associated with the various Federal and State disability and poverty benefit programs. Visit their site for information on [reasonable accommodation](#) and [self-employment and small business](#).

ⁱ Callahan, 2004; Condon, 2004; Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2006