

Customized Employment Corner

Customized employment: A growing strategy for facilitating inclusive employment

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The One-Stop service delivery system was established under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 (Public Law 105–220, 29 U.S.C. 2801 et seq.). One of the core principles of WIA was to provide universal access to services by “giving all Americans [including those with disabilities] access to comprehensive services, information and resources that can help them in achieving their career goals” (Federal Register, April 8, 2004; p. 18629). The term customized employment was coined in 2001 when the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) was created within the US Department of Labor [13].

Customized employment was conceived as a way for the generic One-Stop System to welcome and serve individuals with disabilities [6]. It also was designed to apply to and benefit anyone who has unique circumstances that affect employment including individuals who do not have disabilities [12]. The Federal Register (June, 2002) defined customized employment as:

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.

There has been debate in the field regarding customized employment and its relationship to supported employment [6]. Many authors have described best practices for supported employment including customer choice [2], person-centered planning [8,9], self-determination [16], job negotiations and employment proposals [1,5,10,11], careers vs. just a job [3] and workplace supports [3]. Wehman et al. [15] identified several core values of supported employment as:

- *Presumption of employment*: everyone regardless of disability has the capability to do and have a job.
- *Competitive employment*: employment occurs within the local labor market in community businesses.
- *Self-determination and control*: people with disabilities choose and regulate their own employment supports and services, career satisfaction will result.
- *Commensurate wages and benefits*: people with disabilities should earn wages and benefits equal to that of coworkers performing the same or similar jobs.

- *Focus on capacity*: people with disabilities should be viewed in terms of their abilities, strengths, and interests rather than their disabilities.

Recently, these best practices and core values have been described as the characteristics of customized employment [4,7]. Callahan [4] stated that customized employment is “much like supported employment in many ways,” the “progeny” of supported employment. Clearly, the principles and indicators of customized employment are not new ideas but have developed over the course of the past two decades with the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in their communities.

Problematic to supported employment has been how Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) have implemented the service. There are individuals who have been placed using supported employment services earning less than minimum wages in group settings as well as individualized placements [16]. People with disabilities are still being placed in jobs that are driven by the local labor market rather than the identification of negotiated positions and non-stereotypical careers based on the individuals’ preferences and choices. Unfortunately, the opportunity to choose a job and to make decisions about the delivery of supported employment services may still be driven by the person’s perceived disabilities rather than through personal choice and abilities. Customized employment is being suggested as the alternative to supported employment to ensure that individuals with disabilities become competitively employed in jobs of choice.

Perhaps it is not important or necessary to debate whether customized employment is or is not supported employment. The critical issue is whether CRPs are implementing the best practices that have developed over the past twenty years that we know result in *inclusive competitive employment outcomes*. The field may just need a paradigm shift to make competitive employment “the first choice” vs. segregated facility-based services that still proliferate in the United States. If customized employment results in individuals earning at least minimum wages and emphasizing wages commensurate with those being paid to their non-disabled coworkers in jobs that have been negotiated to match their skills, interests, and abilities, then we need to advance the concept.

In order to build the capacity of One Stops to implement customized employment, ODEP has funded demonstration efforts with 20 projects currently operating throughout the country as well as a technical assistance center for these projects. Additionally, ODEP has funded a technical assistance center, Training and

Technical Assistance Center for Providers (T-TAP), for CRPs to expand their use of customized employment. Both the adult technical assistance center, National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult, and T-TAP have produced training documents, including fact sheets on customized employment. However, there are no regulations as to how customized employment should be implemented.

The available resources state that customized employment is employment in integrated job sites paying at least minimum wage in a position that has been specifically negotiated for the job seeker with a disability. It also includes self-employment and entrepreneurial ventures. Customized employment does not include group placements or sub-minimum wage positions that have unfortunately continued under supported employment services.

However, since there are no formal regulations regarding customized employment implementation, the strategy faces the same pitfalls that have limited supported employment implementation. Hours worked and wages earned will be issues as providers negotiate with employers to customize jobs for individuals with significant disabilities. Or, providers may establish small businesses owned by the agency that are not based on their consumers’ interests and desires while saying that they are utilizing customized employment strategies.

Clearly, these concerns and other issues will arise as programs strive to implement customized employment. For instance, how do agencies’ fund customized employment? How do you negotiate jobs paying at least minimum wages for individuals with significant disabilities? What are the components of assisting an individual in setting up a small business venture? How do you train staff to implement customized employment? How do you move individuals from 14 (c) Special Wage Certificate Programs into customized employment? For that matter, how can organizations improve their capacity to facilitate inclusive employment? This column in the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation will attempt to address these implementation questions and concerns in order to move the service delivery system forward and support inclusive employment for individuals with disabilities.

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