

The Inclusion Notebook

Problem solving in the classroom and community

SO YOU'VE BEEN TOLD YOUR CHILD CAN NEVER WORK? CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT AND HOPE FOR THOSE PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED UNEMPLOYABLE

Despite federal laws encouraging the employment of people with disabilities, it can be difficult for some parents/caregivers to imagine their child with a disability working, let alone making at least minimum wage.

Before discussing one method for making this possible, will cost your child lost social security income and benefits, it is important to note that earning an income may not impact Social Security benefits. For example, the Ticket-to-Work program of the Social Security Administration now provides various protections to individuals with disabilities who want to work. Saving money under certain conditions through an A.B.L.E. (Achieving a Better Lifestyle) account is also now possible. Working no longer causes you to lose Medicaid benefits unless you make enough to afford health care insurance on the exchange. These protections are not the point of this article, though, but are mentioned to counteract myths that are based on outdated information. Links to resources where you can learn more about these safeguards and receive benefits counseling appear at the end of this article.

The point of this article is that many individuals with disabilities who could not obtain or maintain a real job in a traditional way now can achieve “competitive integrated employment” through a well-researched process called **Customized Employment**. This means your child or someone else you know can benefit from Customized Employment, too.

What is Customized Employment and Competitive Integrated Employment?

According to the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) in the U.S. Department of Labor:

Customized employment is a flexible process designed to personalize the employment relationship between a job candidate and an employer in a way that meets the needs of both. It is based on an individualized match between the strengths, conditions, and interests of a job candidate and the identified business needs of an employer. Customized Employment utilizes an individualized approach to employment planning and job development — one person at a time . . . one employer at a time. (ODEP website, n.d.)



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Customized employment can include self-employment and, in more traditional work settings, task re-assignments and job carves.

Task reassignment and job carves. These options allow the individual with a significant disability to perform components of others' jobs rather than all tasks that someone without a disability would be required to do. For example, most traditional job specifications come with a line indicating that the employee will have to perform "other related responsibilities." These generally are tasks an employer needs to have accomplished for the benefit of the business but which many employees, particularly those considered professionals, view as unimportant. They prefer, instead, to concentrate on aspects of their job for which they have had specialized training or experience. When they don't perform these other related responsibilities, they create an unmet need for the employer.

Building on professional employee's strengths, knowledge, and experience is essential to job retention and employee satisfaction (Ramlill, 2004). Since some people with more significant disabilities thrive on repetition, derive great satisfaction from performing simpler tasks, and respond well to routines, "task reassignment" means that a new job specification is developed so that individual only performs all or selected duties that previously fell under "other related responsibilities" for professionals. Thus, these tasks are carved out of the job specifications of professionals who then are able to focus on tasks they view as more relevant. As the non-disabled employees become more motivated and productive, and the business prospers, income to pay minimum wage or higher to the individual with a more significant disability (who may or may not still receive support from a human services agency depending on the ability of co-workers and supervisors to monitor work quality, redirect as needed, provide corrective feedback, etc.) is money well spent.

These are principles of the business world that are only recently finding their way into how human services views employment.

Competitive Integrated Employment. To understand Customized Employment, you first need to know what the federal and state departments of labor consider "Competitive Integrated Employment" or CIE. The federal Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) in the U.S. Department of Education defines CIE as jobs that are found in the community and in which workers with disabilities receive compensation by way of wages and benefits that are comparable to non-disabled employees in similar job classifications. Thus, employment is considered to be competitive when the individual earns at least minimum wage and is eligible for promotions, paid leave, health care, and other benefits just like others in similar job classifications have.

Further, CIE means that any employee with a disability has regular and primary contact with non-disabled co-workers, supervisors, vendors, and customers and interacts with them in the course of performing his/her job duties (i.e. is integrated). This also means that prior options for employment developed by human services such as unpaid work, working for subminimum wages, or group supported employment situations are no longer considered CIE. (OSERS, 2017).

DID YOU KNOW?

Individuals with disabilities who were previously thought to be "unemployable" because they could not obtain or maintain a real job in a traditional way can work for minimum wage or higher through a process called "Customized Employment."

CIE is always the outcome achieved when customized employment is successfully implemented. In other words, customized employment assures that individuals who previously were considered unable to achieve CIE actually can obtain and maintain employment provided a particular process is used by schools, service providers, family members, and individuals themselves.

Why Is CIE Important?

Everyone who works has more advantages than people who are unemployed. They earn more money to make where they live a real home, to do things with their friends and family, to entertain themselves in their free time, to exercise their rights as a human being, to feel successful and be a contributing member of society, and to be empowered in a way that people living on public assistance can't be. People with disabilities who work enjoy the same outcomes.

For people without disabilities who work, being surrounded by non-disabled co-workers and supervisors may not be that much of an issue but for employees with disabilities, inclusive work environments provide natural lifestyles, opportunities to make new friends, positive role models, and a sense of belonging.

So How Does Customized Employment Work?

Customized employment starts with the premise that all people who want to work should be able to work despite having a disability. Figure 1 shows the difference between approaches used in Customized Employment and how they differ from both traditional means of getting and keeping a job and human services programs called "Competitive Employment" or "Supported Employment." With the focus on CIE, customized employment is considered by many to be a better alternative – especially given the beneficial outcomes just discussed – to individual day programs, sheltered workshops, and similar situations available only to those who have disabilities. It certainly beats sitting at home playing video games or watching TV, too!

Figure 1: Differences between Traditional Competitive, Supported, and Customized Employment			
Traditional Employment	Competitive Employment	Supported Employment	Customized Employment
Job seekers independently locate job openings, apply/interview for jobs, obtain and maintain employment without further assistance.	Job seekers, with minimal assistance, locate job openings, apply/interview for jobs, obtain and maintain employment without further assistance. Employees may need some assistance from provider agencies in self-advocating for reasonable accommodations or for additional short-term training to supplement what is available to non-disabled employees.	Job seekers who, regardless of how they obtain employment, require assistance to sustain employment. The focus typically is on placement in existing jobs with post-placement job coaching provided to both the employee and employer. Job coaching may be short-term but on-going face-to-face or remote check-ins/booster training are provided by the support agency as needed.	A set of services are provided prior to employment to tailor the employee-employer relationship "in ways that meet both job seeker and employer needs/benefits. CE attempts to avoid the barriers created by job descriptions by unbundling demands through voluntary negotiations with employers (Callahan, May 23, 2018)."

The three characteristics of customized employment that make it unique are called “Discovery,” “Customized Job Development,” and “Systematic Instruction.” These three components work together to assure a smooth flow from the moment a job-seeker is identified to the moment s/he has become a valued employee in a business. It is important to know that, in a smaller provider agency, the same person may be responsible for Discovery, Job Development, and Systematic Instruction in CE. In other words, the same person (1) works with others on the Discovery Team but writes up the Customized plan, (2) performs the CE Job Development role, and (3) serves as the individual’s job coach in providing Systematic Instruction and on-going support. A “job coach” is typically a paraprofessional who supports an individual who has been hired in a traditional competitive job or who supervises a group of individuals who perform specific jobs together. Typically, the employees in these groups are not hired directly by the business. Rather, the business contracts with the agency which then assigns individuals with disabilities to the group. Oftentimes, these supported employees earn subminimum wage and are therefore not really competitively employed. CE is designed to co-exist with individual job coaching and replace group supported employment with individualized employment opportunities.

In larger adult services agencies, Discovery, Job Development, and Systematic Instruction responsibilities may not only involve different people but different departments within the same agency. Sometimes, more than one agency provides each component. A pilot program is being developed, for example, where Discovery is done by a school district, Job Development is done by BRS, and Systematic Instruction by job coaches is funded by DDS. Let’s look at each of these components separately.

Discovery. Customized employment starts with a process of genuine discovery of what an individual’s unique strengths, skills, needs, interests, and preferences are. Instead of identifying what the person cannot do (e.g., be as productive as a co-workers without a disability, complete certain types of work, apply for a job, participate in an interview, “learn the ropes” once a job is obtained), Discovery seeks to identify the person at his or her best. Traditional vocational assessments, including “situational assessments,” usually have little, if anything, to contribute to the Discovery process. For job-seekers with more limited experiences, however, Discovery also involves structured opportunities for the individual to experience a variety of inclusive community settings to observe how they respond in each. Discovery is similar to other forms of person-centered planning but is oriented specifically toward employment possibilities in much greater detail.

Descriptive write-ups of Discovery for each individual result in a Customized Employment Plan. Many organizations and agencies involved with people with disabilities require plans that then may include a Customized plan. This plan may be incorporated into other formal plans such as a Career Plan developed by the CT Department of Rehabilitation Services, an Individualized Education Program developed under IDEA-funded school programs, or an Individual Plan used to guide the provision of services and supports provided by the CT Department of Developmental Services (DDS).

DID YOU KNOW?

There have been many changes -- to Supplemental Security Income guidelines and health insurance, for example -- that encourage **EVERYONE** to work without being worse off because they lose benefits. In fact, almost everyone who works nowadays is **better off** than when they live on benefits alone.

Elan's Discovery Story

Because of the severity of his disability, most professionals who knew Elan did not think he was capable of CIE. A new team went through a detailed Discovery process with him and learned many positive things about him that could be of real benefit in the right kind of job. For example, he could independently do a wide range of work following picture sequences on an iPad, he was motivated to finish all tasks assigned to him, he liked moving from place to place during the day, he preferred working indoors, and he had a penchant for organizing things. By accident, the team also realized Elan could copy type when they discovered him sitting at a computer, efficiently using the keyboard to enter the words and figures from a random sales receipt that had been left nearby.

Elan's resulting Customized Employment Plan called for a job match in a large professional office suite where his work could vary from day to day, all assigned tasks still could be photographed and sequenced for him to do independently, the office manager would be able to send him to where he was most needed, and he could be assigned the regular responsibility of keeping office supplies neat and readily accessible to the professionals in that suite. He would need accommodations and supports that included co-workers taking responsibility to assist him in relocating within the suite, an iPad, supervisors willing and able to photograph task steps, and reminders when it was time to take breaks or go home.

It is highly unlikely, based on the deficit-based materials in his records, that a typical employment specialist would have considered any office work as a viable occupation for Elan unless familiar with the customized employment approach.

Job Development. Job Development in customized employment differs from other disability employment strategies. As discussed in the previous section on Task Reassignment, it focuses on the *unmet needs of a potential employer*. It does not focus on filling an existing job vacancy, training people who have difficulty learning or generalizing skills to do things they may never use in a real job, or expecting certain people with disabilities to be able to do all of the tasks associated with existing job specifications. The result is a good match between the Customized Employment Plan for a particular individual and real work that either is being left undone or is being done by employees whose skills and expertise could generate more revenue for the business if freed from these responsibilities. Thus, a fundamental distinction between job development in customized employment and other approaches to employment of individuals with disabilities is that employment specialists answer the fundamental question of "What do you as a business need?" rather than "How can this individual fit into your existing business model?" It clearly does not involve charity!

Toward this end, job developers approach employers to tour and/or observe business operations to identify those unmet needs. They initiate a conversation that makes business sense to the employer (i.e., could positively impact the business's bottom line) and leads to voluntary negotiation of a new job specification. The job specification is developed specifically for a particular job seeker whose Discovery process led to the decision that s/he would be able to meet those needs and be a good match for the integrated work setting.

Job Development for Elan

Sha'Quann was the staff member assigned to develop a job for Elan. She began by making appointments with a number of professional offices organized in suites such as financial planners, health care providers, and legal services. One day, she was touring a large accounting firm and noticed that a number of highly paid accountants were doing such non-professional tasks as shredding confidential papers, delivering materials to their officemates, retrieving and opening mail from the mail room, and typing in information from documents provided by customers.

Sha'Quann approach Mr. Desmond, the CEO of the firm, with a proposition: How would he like to increase the professional productivity of his accountants by hiring someone who could do much, if not all, of the non-professional tasks they performed and which the receptionist was unable to do because he was required to be the gatekeeper to the office suite. Mr. Desmond was interested so Sha'Quann explained what Elan could do without violating his confidentiality. Together, they developed a new position just for Elan that assigned him the responsibility of doing most, if not all, of the non-professional tasks that kept the firm going. The receptionist was assigned the responsibility of taking requests for help from the accountants for these tasks and assigning Elan according to criteria for prioritization that Mr. Desmond established.

To make a long story short again, Sha'Quann negotiated a starting salary that was actually higher than minimum wage and made arrangements for Elan to become acclimated to his new place of employment. Two years later, Elan has increased his hours from one to three days per week, begun to socialize outside of work with co-workers, and received an hourly raise as his responsibilities have increased. The firm has hired two more accountants full time, business has never been better, and Mr. Desmond has been an outspoken advocate of hiring people like Elan based on what they can do, not rejecting them outright because they could not apply for and be hired in a traditional way.

Through the customized employment approach to job development, Elan as a job-seeker landed a long-term position in CIE at an accounting firm. As we said earlier, it is important to understand that wage-earners like Elan now have multiple options to earn real pay for real work without losing essential benefits but actually gaining additional benefits simply because they are working.

Systematic Instruction. This third component of Customized Employment results in training both the individual and the natural support system that exists in an integrated workplace.

DID YOU KNOW?

Customized Employment has three main components: Discovery, a different and highly individualized approach to Job Development, and Systematic Instruction to assure that the job-seeker has the skills and support they need to be successful.

Systematic Instruction for Elan

Since Elan's family uses his Medicaid funds to purchase services from a larger adult services organization, Elan has multiple individuals involved in achieving successful CE for him. Elan's job coach is Juan. Here is how Juan provide job coaching services to Elan.

Rather than have Elan "sink or swim," Juan made arrangements to visit the job site where Sha'Quann had negotiated a job for Elan. Juan carefully took photos of the small steps involved in using the shredder, opening the computer to an Excel file to input customer data, etc. Instead of systematically training Elan to perform these tasks himself, though, Juan engaged the receptionist and some of the accountants in teaching Elan the skills he needed to be of genuine help to them. Juan modeled the systematic instruction strategies he knew for the firm's staff, provided corrective feedback to them, and eventually was able to faded out for the most part.

When Juan's services were required again, it was because new staff needed to learn how to support Elan or because, e.g., the time-reporting system or computers were upgraded. Mr. Desmond was more than happy to reach out to Juan whenever these "blips" occurred. Sometimes they meet over coffee and other times by Skype or phone.

Can Your Child Can Benefit from Customized Employment?

The only way to answer this question is to implement these components of customize employment in the manner that has been shown to work. As a parent, you can start the process with your child by asking school teams or case managers to look at your child differently and to stop being gate-keepers to employment without actually trying this approach first. You can assure that employment opportunities for your son or daughter are developed specifically to align with his/her strengths, interests, needs, and preferences. Maybe you know someone who runs a business who would be happy to have their unmet needs met by a reliable employee such as your son or daughter. Maybe someone else needs to develop relationships with potential employers who are highly motivated to pay at least minimum wage to have someone take care of their unmet needs and improve their bottom line. A job specification unique to your child can often be negotiated with that employer to make sure there is a good match between your child abilities and what an employer needs. You can make sure that your child is not left to sink or swim but rather is systematically taught to perform the duties in his/her personal job specification and supported, preferably by natural supports such as non-disabled co-workers and supervisors, to perform those tasks efficiently and effectively. Mostly, you can have high expectations that your child CAN work even if you've been discouraged from believing she or he can!

Does customized employment work for everyone? The answer to this is "no" but it offers much hope for those who want to work but previously were not even given any chance at all to make a contribution to the workforce. We urge you to consider the possibilities for your child, too.

Resources

ABLE Accounts <https://www.able-now.com/>

Benefits Counseling about Employment and Your Disability Benefits <https://www.ct.gov/brs/cwp/view.asp?q=456890>

Marc Gold & Associates (the group that has been providing customized employment training in CT) <http://www.marcgold.com/>

Ticket to Work Program of the SSA <https://www.ssa.gov/work/>

References

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