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Customized Employment: Practical Solutions for Employment Success

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Customized Employment: Practical Solutions for Employment Success

Abstract

[Excerpt] Customized Employment offers the chance for a job to fit who we are, what we need, and what we have to offer. It provides an avenue to employment for any job seeker who feels that traditional job search methods do not meet their needs. Customized Employment means 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 with a complex life. The process is designed to meet the workplace needs of the employer and the discrete tasks of the position. When a customized relationship is developed, a shared employment alliance results.

Keywords

customized employment, disability, public policy, workforce

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CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT

Practical
Solutions for
Employment
Success

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“As we invest in critical job training, we are giving workers the bargaining power they need to custom-design their jobs around their lives—instead of the other way around.”

—Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao

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The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) within the U.S. Department of Labor is committed to improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. To achieve this goal, ODEP established a Customized Employment initiative to build the capacity of workforce systems to serve all customers, including individuals with disabilities. The strategies developed through this initiative can assist all workforce customers who have complex needs and may require more individual assistance to achieve their employment goals. The Customized Employment initiative also focuses on incorporating universal strategies into all aspects of workforce services.

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Customized Employment: A New Competitive Edge

Customized Employment offers the chance for a job to fit who we are, what we need, and what we have to offer. It provides an avenue to employment for any job seeker who feels that traditional job search methods do not meet their needs.

Customized Employment means 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 with a complex life. The process is designed to meet the workplace needs of the employer and the discrete tasks of the position. When a customized relationship is developed, a shared employment alliance results.

Why Consider the Customized Employment Approach?

Customized Employment can provide an advantage for job seekers who struggle in the competitive job market. It is particularly useful for those who have barriers to employment such as limited skills or education, inadequate childcare or transportation resources, disabilities, or cultural or language differences. Customized employment can work for anyone with a complex life.

Everyone Customizes...

Job seekers routinely consider the work environment, employer characteristics, and other conditions they prefer. Most employees, soon after landing a job, begin to customize their jobs based on personal preferences, contributions, or strengths. Customized Employment starts this process with up-front negotiations between job seekers and employers and may include more significant modifications to the employer's work expectations.

A "Win-Win" Situation

Because the relationship between job seekers and employers is individualized and voluntarily negotiated, opportunities can be created that benefit both parties. This approach gives an advantage to the customized job seeker over other applicants, since that person uniquely fits the position. At the same time, the employer gains the best possible person to meet the company's needs.

Customized Employment: A New Competitive Edge

Take a Closer Look

Successful Customized Employment opportunities are built on four key elements:

1. Meeting the job seeker's individual needs and interests.
2. Using a personal representative to assist and potentially represent the individual. This can be a counselor, job developer, advocate, employment specialist, or other qualified professional.
3. Negotiating successfully with employers.
4. Building a system of ongoing supports for the job seeker.

1. Individualization

The job seeker drives the Customized Employment process. Together with the personal representative, the job seeker creates a customized plan based on their life experiences, goals, interests, and abilities. This plan is used as the blueprint to identify employer opportunities and create a proposal for a potential employer.

2. Representation

Personal representatives, such as those mentioned earlier, can represent the job seeker when customizing employment opportunities. However, this does not mean that they are the decision-makers. Personal representatives need to consider the following components from the job seeker's perspective: preferences and interests, the contributions the job seeker can make, tasks to be performed, and potential employers. If the job seeker needs ongoing or intensive supports to succeed on the job, personal representatives can play a key role in accessing those supports. They can also assist with negotiation. Not all individuals will choose to have such representation, but some may require assistance behind the scenes in planning for the negotiation process.

More Than Just a Good Fit

Creating a good fit between job seeker and employer is an essential component of customized employment, but true customization requires negotiating job responsibilities as well as employer expectations.

3. Negotiation

Customized Employment requires meeting specific employers, getting to know them, and learning about their staffing needs. Through this process, the personal representative and job seeker determine whether there is the potential for a Customized Employment relationship and determine negotiation points. The job seeker and the personal representative then develop a proposal that demonstrates how the job seeker can meet the employer's needs, resulting in value for the employer. The negotiation and agreement to hire a person for a Customized Employment situation are voluntary for both the job seeker and the employer, and should result in a mutually beneficial outcome.

4. Ongoing Supports

Customized Employment opportunities include the expectation that accommodations and supports will be available to the job seeker and the employer as necessary. Supports can include (but are not limited to) benefits counseling, personal assistance, and adaptive equipment. These supports should be individualized and flexible to reflect the unique needs of both the job seeker and employer.

Customized Employment Success Story

A large commercial real estate business decreased the time it took to complete transactions by restructuring administrative support to manage a central filing room. Specific administrative support tasks were identified and assigned to José, a job seeker with a disability. The job was customized to align with his skills and his interest in an office job. His job duties included delivering packages and faxes, creating files for property submissions, routing submissions to the appropriate account manager, collating packets, and selected filing. This allowed other, more detailed administrative tasks to be performed by co-workers. As a result, real estate transactions were accomplished much more quickly, the volume of transactions increased, and the business began making more money on each of its real estate transactions.

Customized Employment: Principles and Indicators

Customized Employment is the voluntary negotiation of a personalized employment relationship between a specific individual and an employer that fulfills the business needs of the employer. The negotiation process addresses areas such as job duties, terms of employment, services and supports necessary to carry out the job duties, and expectations adapted to the needs or special circumstances of one particular job seeker.

Customized Employment strategies result in individually designed services, supports, and jobs negotiated to fit the needs of a specific job seeker or employee. These strategies may include aspects of other employment approaches, such as:

- Supported employment services
- Supported entrepreneurship services, microenterprises, or small businesses
- Individualized job development
- Job carving and restructuring
- The development of microboards

Customized Employment Strategies

The Customized Employment process is not a single strategy, service, or support but rather a flexible blend of strategies, services, and supports designed to increase employment options for job seekers with complex needs through voluntary negotiation of the employment relationship. Customized Employment can be useful for all job seekers, including those without disabilities, who have unique circumstances affecting employment. It builds on proven principles, services and supports, and strategies—such as supported employment—that have resulted in success for job seekers with complex needs. It is appropriate for job seekers and existing employees whose changing circumstances require negotiation to customize employment tasks, expectations, or working conditions.

Customized Employment Principles

The following principles are fundamental to Customized Employment.

- The employer voluntarily negotiates specific job duties or employee expectations.
- The negotiated employment relationship meets both the unique needs, strengths, and interests of the job seeker or employee and the discrete needs of the employer.
- The job seeker is the primary source of information and decides the direction in which to explore the job market.
- The job seeker controls the planning process that captures their preferences, interests, and connections in the community.
- Even prior to planning, exploratory time is essential to uncover the job seeker's unique needs, abilities, and interests. More formal or traditional assessment may supplement this exploratory phase if necessary, but it should not be used as the primary source of information for planning.

- Customized Employment results in jobs that fit the individual and therefore have the potential for advancement for job seekers who have been chronically unemployed or underemployed.

The following fundamental principles are shared by Customized Employment and other employment processes.

- Work occurs in an integrated, individualized work situation in the community or in a personal business alongside people who do not have disabilities.
- Employment results in pay at the prevailing wage or “going rate.”
- Employment outcomes may include creating a job through self-employment.
- The job or business outcomes must be individualized – one person at a time – with no grouping of persons unless they are co-owners of a business venture.
- The process is facilitated through a blend of services, supports, and resources that include the workforce system and other public and private partners such as disability service providers. These resources are coordinated to meet the job seeker’s needs.

Customized Employment can be used either prior to or after employment as a strategy to modify job duties and/or other employer expectations for an individual who has complex needs.

Customized Employment Indicators

The following indicators must be present in order for a process to be considered Customized Employment.

- As a result of Customized Employment, the employee has a personalized job description and/or other employer expectations that did not exist prior to the negotiation process.
- The individual makes a tangible contribution to the employer’s enterprise.
- The individual is hired and paid directly by the employer.
- Customized Employment offers the opportunity for personal representation by a job developer, as appropriate, to assist the job seeker in negotiating with employers.
- Customized Employment is based on an array of strategies that allow job duties to be tailored to satisfy both job seeker and employer needs.
- Personal budgets, individual training accounts, and other forms of individualized funding that provide choice and control to the person and promote self-determination are used in Customized Employment.
- All individually designed services and supports needed by the job seeker for success are offered by the employer, the workforce system, and/or funders of services.

Job Seeker Exploration

Customized planning is critical to negotiating a Customized Employment relationship. But before the planning begins, exploratory time is needed to understand the job seeker's dreams, goals, personal preferences, life experiences, and the needs they express. This exploration is also critical to identify the complexities that the job seeker brings to potential employment relationships. Formal testing and evaluation may be used as a supplement to this exploration when specific information is needed to complete the picture.

Self-Exploration, Shared Exploration, Facilitated Exploration: Options for All Job Seekers

Exploration can be accomplished in a number of ways, depending on the needs and preferences of the job seeker. Many job seekers will wish to engage in a process of self-exploration, often facilitated by others, that involves answering questions, reflecting on ideas and past experiences, and identifying personal issues and challenges. Other job seekers may wish to participate in a peer group such as a job club or other group in which members assist each other in shared exploration. Still other job seekers, especially those with significant complexities, will benefit from facilitated discovery, a process in which an employment professional, family member, or friend spends the time necessary to understand the applicant's strengths, needs, and preferences. This range of possible approaches to exploration is critical to ensure true customization for each job seeker.

The Place to Start: Who Is This Applicant?

Discovering a job seeker's strengths and uncovering their employment-related goals and experiences is the place to start. Assisting the job seeker to explore answers to the following key questions will help guide the process.

- What life experiences have I had?
- What are my strengths, interests, and preferences?
- What do I have to offer to an employer?
- What is important to me in a job?
- What motivates me to work?
- What supports will I need to be successful?

But exploration involves much more than simply asking job seekers about their issues. Exploration also involves spending time with applicants and interviewing friends, family, and colleagues, recommended by the job seeker, who have positive information to share. It is critical that the life circumstances of the job seeker be understood through observation and participation as well as conversation. Adequate time to explore and understand the answers to these questions lays the groundwork for the customized planning process to follow.

Targeting Tasks and Other Potential Contributions

During exploration, tasks, skills, and other potential contributions can be observed and discussed with the job seeker. This Task List is a critically important component of the customized plan and employer negotiations that targets specific duties of the applicant's customized job description.

Exploration and Employment Supports

Employment supports are the formal and informal activities at a job that enable people to successfully complete their work. Employment supports can be both internal and external to the job. The customized planning process needs to consider what, if any, employment supports that individual may need. Exploration provides the information necessary to plan for the employment supports that might be needed for success.

The Individual Profile

The information obtained during exploration needs to be documented to account for the various activities used to get to know the job seeker. There are numerous strategies—including profiles, portfolios, and other creative means—to capture the body of information that will be used as the basis for the customized planning process.

How Family, Friends, and Personal Representatives Can Help

- Job seekers will often use a personal representative to help them plan. The personal representative's role is to learn about the job seeker—not to presume information, diagnose, or test and compare the applicant with others.
- People who really know the job seeker can help to fully explore interests, skills, and dreams.
- Information from a wide variety of sources, such as those found at One-Stop Career Centers, is also often part of exploration. These resources can provide useful information about potential directions to employment and a perspective on the job seeker that might be otherwise overlooked.

Customized Planning: Creating a Blueprint for Job Development

Customized Employment is based on an individualized determination of a person's strengths, requirements, and interests. As such, the process requires time for exploration and planning prior to negotiating an employment relationship. Through a process of exploration, job seekers express their dreams, goals, personal preferences, life experiences, and needs. The next step is a customized planning process, resulting in an individualized career profile that:

- Details the applicant's strengths, needs, and interests.
- Develops a "Task List" proposal for potential employers.
- Directs the development of a Customized Employment relationship with employers.
- Identifies potential employers to be contacted.
- Outlines the supports necessary for employment to be successful.

Customized Employment planning is distinct from many other planning approaches in that the issue of job development is discussed and detailed within the plan, rather than being handled simply through the relationships and contacts of a job developer. Information used during plan development is based on the information discovered by and with the applicant.

Features of Customized Planning:

1. The job seeker is fully involved in the planning process, decides who will participate, and directs their own blueprint for job development.
2. The plan should be developed with the job seeker's vision of their interests and career goals as the primary focus, as determined through exploration.
3. The focus is on the job seeker's preferences, talents, life experiences, and dreams, rather than their challenges or limitations.
4. Family, friends, and natural social networks serve as a secondary source of input, opinions, and support. The job seeker is always the primary source of information.
5. Concerns and complexities are considered solvable through negotiation and support, and must not become reasons to rule out career options.
6. The planning process always focuses on obtaining community-based, integrated employment that pays a competitive wage.

A Customized Blueprint for Employment

The Customized Employment plan results in a document that serves as a blueprint for the job search. It must:

- Clearly represent the job seeker’s talents and potential contributions, including a Task List.
- Outline the applicant’s strengths, needs, and interests as the basis of the “blueprint.”
- Identify specific employers to be contacted, including relationships and connections to those employers as well as their potential task needs.
- Address the supports necessary to obtain and maintain employment.

This information can be presented to prospective employers as a proposal or portfolio of the job seeker’s accomplishments and interests. It can also be included in the applicant’s resume.

Customized Planning and Job Site Supports

One principle of Customized Employment is making employment supports available that are developed from the customized planning process and noted in the blueprint. Employment supports help the job seeker prepare for, get to, and be successful at work. The type of supports and the methods used to provide supports will be unique to each Customized Employment position and business.

When designing support strategies for Customized Employment, it is important to consider the following strategies:

1. Use what’s already in the workplace.
2. Adapt what is in the workplace.
3. Supplement what is in the workplace.

Customized Employment Success Story

During the planning process, Maria stated her dream of working in the theater. Her personal representative found a theater company that hired expensive temporary personnel to meet seasonal work fluctuations. The personal representative negotiated the creation of an administrative clerk job that would float between departments, ending the need to hire temporary staff. This saved money for the company and gave the job seeker the opportunity to work in her area of interest.

Negotiating with Employers

An essential element in Customized Employment is negotiating job duties or employee expectations to align the skills and interests of a job seeker with a disability to an employer's needs. This negotiation results in a job description that describes a customized relationship between employer and employee. Rather than trying to sell employers on the concept of hiring people with disabilities, it is better to appeal directly to the employers' needs. The goal is to negotiate Customized Employment options that benefit both the employer and the job seeker.

Where to Start?

Get to know the person. Customized Employment starts with an applicant exploration process that leads to an employment plan based on the job seeker's customized planning process. (See the "*Job Seeker Exploration*" and "*Creating a Blueprint*" fact sheets.) The customized planning process also identifies potential employers for job development negotiation.

Get to know employers. The employers to become familiar with include those identified by the job seeker during the customized planning process. Once identified, arrange informational interviews—not to sell the business on your services or a particular job seeker, but to learn about the business and how it works.

Find negotiation points. After learning about specific businesses, figure out how they can benefit from your services and the job seeker you represent.

Identify Employers

As a resource for planning, an initial survey of potential employers should be broad and include any employer who might potentially fit the job seeker. The job seeker's plan should then drive the process of identifying specific employers. Additional suggestions can come from:

- The job seeker—ask about employers they know
- The job seeker's family, friends, and neighbors
- Local business publications and the business section of the paper
- Local business associations such as the Chamber of Commerce
- The personal representative's own contacts

Get Your Foot in the Door

Once you have researched area businesses, a good way to learn about them is to visit for informational interviews. Ask how the business operates and what its staffing needs are. Informational interviews are chances to **attract employer interest** in Customized Employment.

It is also possible to directly solicit specific employers, identified during the planning meeting, who are called upon for the purpose of convincing them to consider hiring the job seeker. Such solicitations need to include a proposal that balances the two issues described above: a) the needs of the employer and b) the potential contributions of the applicant. Regardless of which approach job developers use, successful customized employment requires successful negotiation. The following strategies will assist in negotiating with employers.

Find Negotiation Points

Once you have become acquainted with an employer and their needs, look for ways in which your service and the job seeker you represent can benefit the business by improving operations or increasing profits.

Negotiation points may include:

- The responsibilities of the position as listed in the job description
- The time, hours, and location for the job in question
- The support strategies and supervision the job seeker will need
- Productivity and outcome expectations

Such negotiation points are defined by job seeker and employer preferences.

Present the Proposal

The goal of the customized planning process is to identify a set of tasks the job seeker can perform. Using those tasks and the employer research, the job seeker and the personal representative build a proposal to present to the potential employer.

The preliminary proposal describes the job seeker's skills and how they will benefit the employer. The employer may accept the proposal, suggest modifications to it, or reject it. If the original proposal is not accepted, the discussion can lead to a revised proposal that satisfies both the employer and the job seeker.

Employer participation in this process is always voluntary. The willingness to customize a job description is a decision on the employer's part, not a legal requirement.

Customized Employment Success Story

A large department store hired Scott, a job seeker with a disability, after several informational visits by his personal representative, Shaina, who negotiated a new way for the store to handle merchandise delivery. Originally, store clerks unloaded and repackaged new merchandise. Shaina suggested that the job seeker perform this task. This customized job freed the clerks to spend more time serving customers. As a result, sales increased.

Options to Customize a Job Description

- **Job carving.** A job description is created by modifying an existing job description. The carved job description contains one or more, but not all, of the tasks from the original job description.
- **Negotiating a job description.** The job seeker and the personal representative pick from all the tasks performed at the workplace to create a new, individualized job description.
- **Job creation.** A newly created job description is negotiated based on unmet workplace needs.
- **Job sharing.** Two or more people share the tasks and responsibilities of a job based on each other's strengths.

Negotiate for Employer Gain

The job seeker and the personal representative need to be prepared to show how the proposal will help an employer improve operations. This is probably your most important bargaining point when a job seeker with a disability might need unusual or extensive accommodations or supports. Some of the best customized employment opportunities are created when options for employer gain are targeted. Focus the customized job description on the contribution to the employer, not competition with other job seekers.

Employers gain when:

- Work gets done faster or more precisely
- Employees become more productive
- Profit increases
- Work can be reorganized to flow better
- Overburdened employees can be relieved
- Operations become more efficient

When the business sees potential gain, it is ready to consider hiring a job seeker who might require changes in the workplace.

Informational Interview Pointers

- Ask to meet with a knowledgeable person in the business.
- Make the meeting request easy to fulfill. Say, "I'd like to find out more about your business so I can better understand the human resource needs in your industry," or "I'm really interested in [industry type]. Is it possible for me to briefly visit and get more information?"
- Be prepared: Research the business thoroughly, and prepare questions for the meeting. How does the work get done? What are some of the biggest staffing challenges?
- Indicate an interest in understanding the business's staffing needs and that you may be able to meet them.
- Keep it short. Respect the employer's time—15 to 20 minutes should be more than enough.
- Thank the employer for their time. When you get back to your office, send a written thank-you note.



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