

This article is written by:

the Office of Disability and Employment Policy



This product was developed by Virginia Commonwealth University's T-TAP Project (Training and Technical Assistance for Providers). T-TAP was funded by the U. S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) through a cooperative agreement #E 9-4-2-01217. The contents of this product do not necessarily represent the interpretations or opinions of the DOL. Virginia Commonwealth University is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution providing access to education and employment without regard to age, race, color, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, veteran's status, political affiliation, or disability. If special accommodations are need contact Katherine Inge at kinge@vcu.edu or Voice 804-828-1851 / TTY 804-828-2494.



Customized Employment Q and A

Question: What is Customized Employment?

Answer: Customized Employment is a process for individualizing the employment relationship between a job seeker or an employee and an employer in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on a match between the unique strengths, needs, and interests of the job candidate with a disability, and the identified business needs of the employer or the self-employment business chosen by the candidate. This is a business deal.

Question: Is Customized Employment real employment?

Answer: Yes—Customized employment is real work. 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. The 21st Century workplace cannot be thought of in the same terms as that of the preceding century. The emerging global economy is creating jobs that can't be accomplished under the old 9 to 5 model or don't necessarily need to be performed in the employer's workplace. Further, workers are demanding more autonomy, more freedom, more customization of the terms and conditions of their employment. The world of work is changing to merge the demands of the new workplace and the needs of the workforce. One approach that has emerged is customized employment.

Question: What is the Customized Employment process?

Answer: Customized employment starts with the development of an employment plan based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs and interests of the job candidate with a disability. Once the candidate's goals are established, one or more potential employers are identified. A preliminary proposal for presentation to the employer is developed. The proposal is presented to an employer who agrees to negotiate an individualized job that meets the employment needs of the applicant and real business needs of the employer. Participation in this process by an employer is always voluntary. If the individual has chosen self-employment, the job description would be for the role he or she would play in the business, based on a review of job descriptions of persons already doing that job or similar work, if available. A personal agent or a job developer usually develops the plan, assists the job candidate throughout the process and provides follow up services when appropriate.

Question: How does the personal agent or job developer determine the needs of the individual?

Answer: Conducting an individualized assessment involves listening to the person with a disability describe his or her experiences, interests and abilities. Through understanding the person, the personal agent or job developer can determine potential employment goals. For example, Mr. X dreams about working in the medical field like a majority of his relatives. They wear white coats and Mr. X wants to wear one also. A job in a hospital transporting patients might be appropriate. The individual assessment will lead to the identification of a set of tasks the person can perform that are the raw materials of a customized job description. The tasks, and employer research performed by the personal agent or job developer, become the basis for developing a proposal to be presented in negotiations with an employer. The applicant must agree with the terms of the proposal.

Question: How do you identify potential employers?

Answer: 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 family, friends and neighbors 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.

Question: What is involved in voluntary negotiations?

Answer: Once an employer has agreed to discuss an individualized job description for the candidate, the agent or developer will present the job proposal. The job proposal 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.

Question: What is a customized job?

Answer: A customized job is a set of tasks that differ from the employer's standard job descriptions but are based on tasks that are found within that workplace. A customized proposal unites the tasks that exist in a workplace and makes them available to be rearranged 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 that 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.

Question: How are customized job descriptions developed?

Answer: There are several ways to customize a job description:

1. Carving a job. Creation of a job description based on tasks derived from a single traditional job in an employment setting. The carved job description contains one or more, but not all, of the tasks from the original job description.

Example: The individual assessment showed that the individual has skills to do filing and he has a strong desire to be a police officer. To meet both the individual's needs and employer's needs a carved job was negotiated within a county sheriff's department that incorporates tasks of organizing and filing misdemeanor arrest reports and traffic citations.

2. Negotiated job description. A negotiated job description is one in which all the tasks of the work setting (tasks contained in more than one job description) are available for selection to form a new, individualized job description.

Example: After working in a crew doing evening janitorial work, a worker told his crew director that he wanted a job where he could wear nice clothes, didn't have to clean after other people, and could work around other people. He liked people but never got to see them in his current job. A job working in a department store was negotiated for the individual that combined duties from several departments. Only one part of the job involves maintenance and support activities. Additional duties involve helping the advertising department put up and take down the huge number of weekly ads, helping the furniture department manager rearrange the furniture department, uncrating merchandise in the electronics department and loading merchandise in cars for people at the stock room pick up.

3. Created job description. A created job description is negotiated from unmet needs in the employer's workplace. This leads to a new job description based on unmet needs of the employment setting or based on the self-employment business chosen by the individual.

Example: An individual who is a wheelchair user enjoys people and wants to perform delivery tasks. A branch office manager of an insurance company was receiving frequent complaints that faxes were not being delivered to agents in a timely manner by the fax room clerk. Agents needed the faxes pulled from the fax machine and hand delivered promptly. The job description for the clerk in the fax room involved copying, mailroom responsibilities, and handling the fax machine. Carrying out those responsibilities did not leave time to hand deliver the faxes. The individual was able to meet this genuine employer need through a created job description for delivering the faxes.

Example: A college was having problems with the vending company that serviced its coffee machines. The coffee cups would turn upside down and the coffee would go into the drain. The vendor removed the machines, resulting in complaints from students about the lack of coffee service. Through negotiation with the college, a micro business operated by a person with a disability was established, consisting of a coffee and cookie sales cart.

Question: Is it necessary to reveal the individual's disability during negotiations?

Answer: 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 voluntarily 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.



Information for this FAQ sheet came from T-TAP: Training and Technical Assistance For Providers; Michael Callahan, Marc Gold and Associates; and the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). For additional information, you may contact ODEP at (202) 693-7880 or T-TAP, kinge@atlas.vcu.edu or (804) 828-1851.