

“Customised Employment works because the focus is on one person at a time . . . one business at a time.”

Customised Employment

Work First Customised
Employment™ Program
Outline

Centre for Disability Employment Research
and Practice

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Who is the Centre for Disability Research and Practice?

The Centre has been established to provide a singular focus on improving the evidence base for disability employment practice within Australia. We believe that for employment outcomes to improve, there must be a shift to a whole of life approach for people with a disability. Current disability employment practice centred on economic philosophy fails to recognise employment as one part of a larger picture.

To achieve change, we're gathering like-minded practitioners and researchers to work on the issues and develop the evidence base to support change in disability employment practice. We draw on resources locally and internationally to ensure that our work meets the standards for critical peer review.

The Centre conducts research, advocacy and training that focuses on policy and practice change through advising business and government on policy and practice direction based on rigorous research. Training that starts with organisational change that supports real change and staff practices to provide better client outcomes that are based on the best available evidence. We also work with individuals and families to promote self-determination and self-advocacy focused on employment.

The evolution of employment services under the paradigm shift of the NDIS, and the move to client choice and control will require organisations to create individual solutions unique to their setting. In a sense this is the same process that clients will demand of service providers; unique, individualised custom solutions that meet their dreams, expectations and future career goals.

These solutions aren't found in repeating the past, nor are they found by throwing everything that you've done out and starting again. That's a sure-fire way to create a level of anarchy and uncertainty that will inevitably destroy your organisation. Not a good outcome! Through our extensive overseas network, international experience and a robust research foundation we work with your organisation, staff, clients and families to create a vibrant future. At our heart, we're practitioners first and researchers second.

We create solutions based on research that informs practice, tinged with our practical experience to ensure that it works! Add to this the steady progression of DES towards real choice and control; it isn't difficult to envisage a different future for disability employment. Real choice, real control and real portability that will usher in demands for a new type of service that isn't merely about a job, but one that is individually meaningful, promotes self-determination and supports real inclusion and community cohesion.

Introduction to Customised Employment.

The adoption of Customised Employment (CE) by an organisation as its method of delivering employment services creates a meaningful change in thinking within the organisation. CE at its heart is a person-centred process that puts the client in control and allows for a deeper understanding of the client through rich and detailed conversations – conversations with purpose!

It is not simply a case of training staff in a new method; it is about supporting the organisation, staff, employees and community along what is a rewarding journey that will see new relationships formed and old ones taken to new levels of engagement.

It is for this reason that the adoption of Customised Employment requires a long-term vision and a trusted partner to support your journey.

What is Customised Employment?

The term "Customised Employment" originated during a series of discussions within the Clinton administration's then Committee for People with Disabilities. This later became known as the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODE), a part of the US Department of Labor formally creating a permanent focus on disability employment in 2001. In 2001, ODE funded its first grants to validate customised employment as an effective workplace practice for employing people with a disability previously perceived as not employable.

Customised Employment works because it is not a program, but a set of universal principles and strategies specifically designed to support both sides of the labor force. For the job candidate, the process considers the whole person — his/her skills, interests, abilities, and conditions necessary for successful employment, including job support. For employers, customised employment allows a business to examine its specific workforce needs — both ongoing and intermittent — and fulfil those needs with a well-matched employee.

Customised employment is not a quick-fix for anyone, but a creative alternative that enables job candidates and employers the opportunity to negotiate individual job tasks and/or reassign basic job duties to improve overall productivity in the workplace. No one strategy or method works for every job seeker — and the methodology of Customised Employment is not simply for "people with disabilities."

Since 2001, ODEP's demonstration projects have proven that these strategies can be successful for all applicants.

Projects nationwide have shown positive outcomes not only on behalf of people with significant disabilities but on behalf of a wide range of job candidates, typically and traditionally perceived as "hard-to-serve," and who have various categorical labels within the workforce system: veterans with barriers to employment, transitioning youth, older workers, ex-offenders, people with limited English proficiency, and more!

Along the same lines, no one recruitment strategy works for every employer. Often job descriptions, when conceived initially, do not capture the real needs of a business. By identifying genuine (and often unmet) needs, Customised Employment has the capacity to:

- (1) Improve productivity so that incumbent staff can accomplish more of their global job duties during the work day; and
- (2) Provide a more efficient business operation by promoting productivity and retention.

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Source: www.dol.gov Accessed 1/3/17.

Evidence for Practice - The Origins of Discovery.

Lou Brown and his colleagues (1986) at the University of Wisconsin developed a narrative format known as an inventory strategy for characterising student performance and characteristics. It targeted discrepancies between student performance, their current and subsequent environments as goals for Individual Education Plans (IEP) in education. The process became known as the Ecological Inventory Strategy.

In 1986, Nesbit (a colleague of Brown) and Mike Callahan used the concept to create a Vocational Profile Strategy at Syracuse University. Following on from this Mike Callahan and United Cerebral Palsy Associations (UCPA) conducted a series of demonstrations of the VPS. Between 1987 and 2000 a variety of Vocational Profile and Person Centred Career Planning concepts started to evolve. Victoria Commonwealth University (VCU) adopted the processes espoused by Griffin and Hammis in their Vocational Profile and Person Centred Career Planning manual (1996).

By 1998, the term “Discovery”, was adopted by Mike Callahan at Marc Gold and Associates (MGA) as an alternative to Profile Strategy. Griffin Hammis Associates (GHA) developed the term “Discovering Personal Genius” (DPG) as the descriptor for their method of discovery that focused on finding the evidence to support the emerging vocational themes as a guide to informational interviews which they had been conducting.

Cary Griffin from GHA stated:

“Our particular approach to Discovery is DPG and that evolved out of what we saw didn't work with various models of Person Centred Planning...mostly what I saw was this thing we now call Voc Themes...once I had that and could articulate it a bit the process fell into place...we'd been using info interviews and tweaking those from tours to real conversations for a while and saw how engaged many employers were.... and so on with refinements that continue...”

“MGA has always focused more on the profile than we do...we don’t write exhaustive narratives...we look for evidence supporting the themes and let those guide us to people with the same themes...Not better, just different.”

At its purest, Customised Employment (CE) is a unique model of engagement that focuses on bringing people together to negotiate an employment opportunity or a career path. It is not an employment agency; it is not a job search website - it is a process that focuses on abilities and collective interests of employees and employers and attempts to find an economical solution suitable to both parties.

Definition of CE: “competitive integrated employment, for an individual with a significant disability that is based on an individualised determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the individual with a significant disability and is designed to meet the specific abilities of the individual with a significant disability and the business needs of the employer.” (Jorgensen Smith, Dillahunt-Aspillaga, & Kenney, 2017)

Principles of Customised Employment

The process of CE starts with three fundamental principles (Griffin, Hammis, & Geary, 2007)

1. *Every person is employable in an open employment environment.*

The first principle centres on the belief that society creates the barriers that exacerbate the impact of an impairment. If society is the problem, then changing the construct of the environment is society’s responsibility.

2. *Persons with disabilities, particularly complex disabilities are disadvantaged by traditional competitive employment methodology.*

The second principle comes from a critique of traditional job seeking methods. Finding a job opportunity, making a written application and waiting for a reply has traditionally provided poor outcomes for persons with disabilities. Firstly, the written application needs to be

understood for what it is, a method used by employers to exclude the majority of applicants. Secondly, the proposition of disclosure will become a greater issue of significance using a written resume and thirdly, the applicant under these circumstances, can't get to show the skills and abilities that will become the primary determinant in a positive employment outcome.

3. It's all about the person/s.

The third and final principle defines the critical element of any successful position of sustainable employment – the quality of the relationship between the job seeker and the potential employer. Relationships cannot be established on paper; they can only be developed when key questions about the key individuals are answered, and the participants are encouraged to meet in circumstances that will enhance a quality conversation.

The Process of Customised Employment

The underlying process of CE is known as Discovery. In the 1990's, rather than continually using comparative quantitated assessments to drive employment, the method of Discovery was proposed as an alternate qualitative technique to gather the information necessary to guide the employment pathway (Callaghan, Griffin, & Hammis, 2011).

Discovery is characterised by the following concepts:

- seeks to identify existing information rather than creating information to formulate a new evaluation or diagnosis
- creates a direction for employment possibilities based on a translation of the person's existing life experiences
- finds the ecological validity for actions and skills rather than predicting potential from a functional assessment
- reveals information which can be used as a guide for job matching, not as a method of exclusion

- encourages a “buy-in” at all levels and empowers families, friends and community members to be part of the solution-based framework

Discovery is an in-depth, person-centred investigation of the individual’s life and seeks to find key information, skills, interests and abilities that are expressed in many ways through a range of diverse environments. Trust is placed in the narratives told by people of significance, to cross-reference information which is aimed at answering two important questions:

Who is this person and What are their ideal conditions for employment?

Discovery’s strength also resides in its desire to respect the rights of the individual by developing self-advocacy skills through the process of self-determination. The ability to self-determine through a range of personal goals, including employment has been shown to support better medium to long-term outcomes and an increased chance for independent living (Shogren, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Rifenbark, & Little, 2015). It also develops the skills of self-regulated problem solving leading to better decision making, career and job development (Dean, Burke, Shogren, & Weymeyer, 2017).

As a tool to support transition planning, Discovery has shown early promise. When compared to the more traditional methodology for transition planning, the flexibility of the qualitative person-centred approach of Discovery appears to provide some advantage (Jorgensen Smith, Dillahunt-Aspillaga, & Kenney, 2015; Molina & Demchak, 2016; Stevenson & Fowler, 2016). These, however, are small studies and more data is required with larger participation rates to validate the strength of these findings. In a larger five year study, (Rogers, Lavin, Tran, Gantenbein, & Sharpe, 2008) used customised employment to transition 475 young people in seven school districts. At the completion of the study, 62% of these students had achieved individualised job placements at a competitive wage.

From Discovery to Employment Opportunity

Although an essential and effective tool for job development, Discovery alone provides very little in securing a place of employment. For CE to be effective, Discovery must provide the direction for job developers when designing their job search strategy. It provides guidance towards employment environments that are ecologically aligned with the person's skills, interest and abilities. However, synthesis of the Discovery profile into meaningful data requires well-trained staff that have they high a high level of competency (Harvey, Szoc, Dela Rosa, Pohl, & Jenkins, 2013).

Synthesis of Discovery information is done through a thematic review of the data. Emerging themes become transparent as layers of information are reviewed. In the GHA methodology, three vocational themes are generated. Themes are broad categories of interest; they are not jobs or job descriptions. Themes could include animals, transport, tinkering, assembly, ordinance, care, patience etc. The challenge of the job development team is to assess the types of workplaces that would require these skills. Under the GHA methodology, each theme should generate a minimum of twenty workplace options. Thus, three emerging themes should generate approximately 60 workplace descriptions. It is these descriptions that set job development in motion. Authentic themes cannot be established without a rigorous period of Discovery (Griffin et al., 2007; Griffin, Hammis, Keeton, & Sullivan, 2014).

This methodology therefore highlights four major points: (a) person-centred data, drives job development (b) the individual is always central to any decision making (c) the job development team cannot simply use the next job vacancy as an employment option and (d) CE meets the UNCRPD charter for respecting the rights of the individual during their employment and career development.

Gathering critical information about potential employers increases the chances of a successful placement. Just as CE uses the person-centredness of Discovery to determine the interests, skills and abilities of the job seeker, CE also respects the needs of the employer by conducting a range of conversational style meetings to determine:

Who is this Employer and What are the requirements of this business that can lead to a successful business case for employing this individual?

One of the significant differences with CE is that it respects both parties, the employee and the employer in the negotiation process. A good relationship that is mutually beneficial to both parties is desirable for a sustainable future. To assist in attaining this outcome, techniques such as Informational Interviews are used. These conversations are designed to gather information, not to secure a job. They are extensive and provide the opportunity for the employer to tell the stories behind their business and take you on their journey and expectations for employment. Apart from sharing key information in the development of a business case for employment, this conversational interview also determines the suitability of this employer for our job seeker. Essentially this is just as much a “candidacy interview” for the employer as it is about a place of work. Informational Interviews also take away the inappropriateness of asking for a job without any understanding of the environment the job seeker will be entering (Harvey et al., 2013).

Is Customised Employment an evidence-based process?

“There are no shortcuts in Customised Employment because Customised Employment is the shortcut!”

Cary Griffin. Lochsa Lodge, Idaho. 2017

Good job development should always be embedded in good evidence-based practice (Inge, Graham, Brooks-Lane, Wehman, & Griffin, 2018). Customised Employment is based on sound, evidence-based principles and excellent training programs that provide on-going support to service providers and also families (Harker & Desenberg-Wines, 2017). However, the evidence base is not significant and requires more research to identify why critical parts of the process should always be followed.

In 2018, Inge et al. reported the results from a survey of 28 national experts on CE. The aim of the phone survey, conducted across many states in the USA, was to elucidate critical elements of CE practice and to discuss the way future research could help add empirical evidence to the efficacy of these processes. A thematic analysis was completed of the phone conversations which led to the creation of twelve critical elements of CE practice (Table1). These 12 elements represent good practice for CE, from Discovery through to employer engagement, development of supports, social networking, family education & planning and career development. Currently, there is a paucity of evidence elucidating how and why each of these elements are deemed essential. Our aim is to highlight these points and encourage future research to undertake the challenge of adding to the evidence-base. (Riesen, Morgan, & Griffin, 2015) had similar findings from a review of the literature in 2015. They highlighted areas such as; (a) participants and settings (b) intervention v outcome measures (c) fidelity of CE (d) social validity measures and (e) appropriate data collection including longitudinal data, as areas requiring further research.

The Future of Customised Employment

Customised Employment is an established person-centred process based on good published evidence. It is also in a process that continues to evolve from the early 90's to current day practice. The opportunity exists to develop the evidence base with further empirical research, building on a promising period of development. Just as important for Australia, the current process of Customised Employment is consistent with our legislative obligations under the UNCRPD and NDIS Act (2013). Future policy needs to be guided by a commitment to both of these critical parameters.

Table 1. **Customised Employment: Key Elements of Good Practice**

1. Physically meet at a location of the individual's choice
2. Build rapport and get to know the individual
3. Mindfully listen to the person
4. Identify the individual's interests, skills and abilities
5. Conduct in-depth interviews with family and friends concerning the person's interests, skills and abilities
6. Observe the person in daily activities in a number of different community settings
7. Arrange for the job seeker to observe the local businesses that potentially match the job seeker's interests, skills and abilities
8. Conduct informational interviews with employers at local businesses that are representative of the job seekers interests, skills and abilities
9. Observe the job seeker engaging in a job-related task
10. Assist the job seeker in identifying a work experience(s) to refine /identify job interests, skills and abilities
11. Collaborate with the job seeker, family and friends in confirming the job seeker interests, skills and abilities
12. Negotiate a customised job description

The Process of Implementing Customised Employment in an Organisation

Extensive experience in provider organisations nationally and internationally has illustrated that developing a true Customised Employment program is a multi-stage process. It focuses not merely on staff but engages with management, clients, family and the broader community through education, support and forums.

The process while appearing linear, is anything but due to the unique setting that each organisation exists in and the demands of clients and family.

The following steps are notionally the pathway;

- Review of organisation staff and capacity.
- Training of management and supervisors on the conditions needed to support CE.
- Training of selected staff in Customised Employment – consultant-driven processes.
- Systematic Instruction Training – integral to CE.
 - Ongoing mentoring and support of staff to engage with clients, community and employers. This is initially a weekly process and is staff driven.
- Organisation clients and family forum.
- Value Stream Mapping to understand and eliminate any barriers to CE and staff.
- Training and support for staff and clients to undertake Self-Guided Discovery.
 - This involves community instruction and engages with the broader community, including schools. Mentoring is less intensive.
- Training and instruction around Group Guided Discovery.
- Train the Trainer after successful embedding of CE and CE champions identified.
 - Ongoing mentoring and support for Trainers. Mentoring as required.
- Research and evaluation – ongoing.

As mentioned, the process is not linear and adjusted according to issues and events that occur during the training and support processes. As an example, Value Stream Mapping is normally triggered in response to issues that our mentoring and support staff uncover and continues as we create a future state map of the organisation.

We know that it takes about 12 months or about 5 – 6 Discovery documents before staff have their light-bulb moment and get it! It is for this reason that we support and mentor staff. Add to this the richer emotional involvement with the process and clients, and it is not hard to see why our standard practice is to support your staff with mentors that have backgrounds in mental health. Nope, no one is going down the rabbit hole; it is just that

Customised Employment is a rewarding process that digs deep and encourages growth in the staff and their capacity to engage and use empathy with clients. You can imagine how rewarding it is to see clients grow, so we will shed a tear with you!

Self-Guided Discovery is an ideal tool to engage with families around NDIS planning and is effective at promoting self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Similarly, Self-Guided Discovery is a well-received tool to assist school career counsellors with transition to work planning. Group Guided Discovery is an advanced application of Discovery to higher functioning individuals who may or may not have a disability.

Customised Employment is an advanced skill set that puts the individual at the centre of the process and in charge of the deliverables. On average it takes about 35 hours to successfully undertake Discovery, although the process can be undertaken with a range of 20 - 60 hours.

The process is client driven and is about developing relationships; relationships with clients, families, employers and the community.

Organisational Change.

What happens? Well, experience tells us that organisations that adopt CE correctly find that clients and staff engage in richer purposeful conversations. Often CE staff discover that people that they are working with come to them with an increasingly richer narrative about their life, their goals and aspirations.

Organisations often adopt the Discovery document as their official client record in part due to the richer detail and story that it creates around the client, their family and their community.

Still with Us?

So, what are you waiting for?

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