

Employer views of customized employment: A focus group analysis

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Revised/Accepted May 2017

Abstract.

BACKGROUND: The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) modified the definition of supported employment to include customized employment. Because customized employment emphasizes meeting the business needs of employers, it seems critical that the employment specialist understand how to effectively engage employers during the customized employment process.

OBJECTIVE: Because there is limited research on employer perspectives regarding hiring people with intellectual and developmental disabilities using the customized employment process, this study sought to identify the perceptions of employers about barriers and facilitators to the customized employment process.

METHODS: A standardized open-ended focus group interview method (Patton, 1990) using semi-structured “stem questions” was used to learn about employer perceptions of customized employment.

RESULTS: Ten employers representing a variety of small to large businesses participated in the focus groups. Five major themes emerged related to employer perceptions of customized employment including: business need, networking, communication, training, and financial.

CONCLUSION: To improve the customized employment process, employment specialists must be trained to effectively engage with employers during discovery and negotiation. Employment specialists need targeted training on making the business case for customizing a job for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Keywords: Customized employment, employer views, business need, focus group

1. Introduction

For at least four decades, researchers have examined methods to support people with disabilities to find meaningful integrated employment (Bellamy, Sheehan, Horner, & Boles, 1980; Novak, Rogan, Mank, & DiLeo, 2003; Wehman, Revell, & Brooke, 2003). During this time, researchers developed strategies to assist people with significant disabilities in obtaining employment in integrated settings (Rogan, Novak, Mank, & Martin, 2002; Wehman & Kregel 1985; Wehman & Kregel, 1995; Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998). Federal policy also reinforced the

idea of creating integrated employment opportunities for people with the most significant disabilities when supported employment was codified as a service provision in the 1986 Rehabilitation Act Amendments.

Unfortunately, despite the sustained research and policy effort to promote meaningful employment for people with disabilities, outcome data suggests that integrated employment rates for people with disabilities are still well below rates for people without disabilities. For example, the 2010 National Organization on Disability reported that only 21% of individuals with disabilities were employed full or part-time (N.O.D, 2010). This data is similar to employment data compiled by the American Community Survey (ACS) which reported that only 33.7% of adults age 16–64 with disabilities are employed (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2015). Moreover,

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during the past decade, there has been a troubling decline in integrated employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving day supports from state agencies; only 19.1% of this population is currently working in integrated employment (Butterworth et al., 2016).

In response to the poor employment outcomes for people with disabilities, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) included specific amendments designed to improve employment outcomes for individuals with the most significant disabilities. For example, WIOA amended the Rehabilitation Act to define competitive integrated employment as full or part-time work at minimum wage or higher where workers with disabilities are fully integrated with workers without disabilities. WIOA also modified the definition of supported employment to include customized employment. The statute defined customized employment as “competitive integrated employment, for an individual with a significant disability that is based on an individualized 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” (p. 1634). The statute also outlined specific strategies for implementation of customized employment including: (a) exploring jobs with the individual; (b) working with employers to facilitate placement, including customizing a job description based on current employer needs or on previously unidentified and unmet employer needs; (c) developing a set of job duties, a work schedule, and job arrangement, along with specifics of supervision (including performance evaluation review), and determining a job location; (d) representing a professional, chosen by the individual, or self-representation of the individual in working with an employer to facilitate placement; and (e) providing services and supports at the job placement (P. L. 113–128).

The U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (n.d.) listed a number of indicators that must be present in order for a process to be considered customized employment. One of these indicators required that the customized employee have a “personalized job description and/or other employer expectations that did not exist prior to the negotiation process.” (para. 4). In addition, Harvey, Szoc, Rosa, Pohl, and Jenkins (2013) developed a competency model for customized employment that required an employment specialist to possess

the knowledge and skills to understand business and employment practices. The competencies also require an employment specialist to be proficient at business networking. To effectively negotiate a customized job, therefore, an employment specialist must have honed business skills to discover the interests and preferences of an individual with disabilities and match this information to the demands and needs of the employer.

While there are numerous studies regarding employer perspectives on hiring and retaining individuals with disabilities using traditional approaches to employment (e.g., Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995; Kay, Jans, & Jones, 2011; Luecking 2008), there is limited research on how employment specialists can work with employers to customize jobs. One such study by Luecking, Cuzzo, and Buchanan (2006) examined employers’ reactions to hiring people with disabilities, using a customized employment process. The authors conducted a telephone survey of nine employers who hired individuals with disabilities into customized jobs through a model demonstration project. The authors found that the customized employment process met employer needs, helped meet production goals, and improved customer satisfaction. However, the study did not provide information about how to initially engage employers to learn about business needs during the customized employment process.

Riesen, Morgan, and Griffin (2015) conducted a review of peer-reviewed articles on customized employment published between 2001 and 2015 and noted a paucity of research on how to effectively engage employers during the customized employment process. They suggested that future research examine how employer policies and practices (a) influenced employer decisions to customize jobs, (b) served as facilitators or barriers to customizing a job, and (c) provided information on how on-the-job training and supports can be developed. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to interview employers to learn about their perspectives regarding customized employment. Since customized employment represents a departure from the traditional supply-side perspective of hiring employees, we wanted to explore the views of employers who are accustomed to traditional hiring methods. We reasoned that a sample of employers with no experience with customized employment would provide unbiased responses to help us determine how employment specialists can purposefully engage employers during the discovery and negotiation process. We

used the following research question to guide the study: Given brief training on customized employment, what do employers with no experience with customized employment identify as facilitators and barriers to the process?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Focus group participants were recruited from two separate entities: one state's Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities database and from the same state's Department of Workforce Services online employer database. The Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities is designed to promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The committee, along with other responsibilities, establishes contacts with various community employers to identify and resolve barriers to employment for people with disabilities. The committee maintains contacts of businesses that are responsive to employment of people with disabilities. Workforce Services is a state agency that assists people with job preparation and job seeking skills and works with employers on economic development and employee recruitment. We chose to recruit employers from the Governor's Committee listserv and the Workforce Services database because they were available to the researchers. Although we recruited from the database of the Governor's Committee knowing that many of these employers hired individuals with disabilities, we sought employers with no experience with customized employment. All participants were offered a \$100.00 honorarium to participate.

2.1.1. Governor's Committee on employment of people with disabilities recruitment

To begin the recruitment process, the Director of the Governor's Committee forwarded an email to employers on the committee's list serve from the researchers that described the purpose of the study and asked these employers if they would like to participate in an online focus group. Employers who expressed interest in participating in the focus group were asked to contact the researchers for more information. A total of 14 employers responded to the email request and contacted the researchers for more information. Employers who expressed interest were subsequently contacted by the first author via email

and were provided an informed consent form, information about the purpose of the focus group study, and information about how to participate in one of three focus groups. Eight employers from this list agreed to participate and returned signed consent forms.

2.1.2. Workforce Services database recruitment

Workforce Services maintains a public database containing over 80,000 names and phone numbers of employers in the state. The researchers downloaded this list and used a random numbers table to select 175 employers. A research assistant used the random sample call list to solicit employer participation in the focus group. From the list of 175 employers, 20 of the phone numbers on the list were disconnected, no longer in service, or wrong numbers; 81 contacts did not answer or had an answering machine. Of the remaining 74 employers, 66 employers expressed no interest in participating; and eight contacts expressed interest. Employers who expressed interest were contacted by the researchers via email and were forwarded information identical to that provided to the Governor's Committee employers. Three employers from this list returned the informed consent and agreed to participate in the study. However, one of these employers did not attend the focus groups session that they identified. Therefore, two employers from the Workforce Services database participated.

2.2. Procedures

Upon receipt of the signed informed consent form, employers were provided with three alternative dates for an online focus group and were asked to independently select one of the sessions. Three dates for three separate focus groups were identified for convenience of the participants and to prevent large numbers of individuals in any particular group. There was no attempt to require representatives of certain types of businesses to attend particular sessions. After the employer selected a focus group date, the researchers sent a confirmation email that outlined how to participate in the online focus group. The email included a URL link to a 3-min, 40 s video developed by the Office of Disability Policy on customized employment. The video showed three vignettes of people with disabilities working in customized jobs and provided interviews by national customized employment experts. The video also presented interviews with employers who had hired the three individuals

highlighted in the vignettes who described the customized employment process. Employers were asked to watch this video prior to the focus group to better understand the customized employment process. All employers confirmed that they watched the video prior to the joining the focus group. Employers were also provided a URL link to a brief online Qualtrics® survey designed to gather basic demographic and business information. The survey asked questions about the number of employees, type and purpose of business/service, and whether or not participants had hired individuals with significant disabilities in the past. All employers completed this survey.

2.2.1. *Online focus groups*

Each of the three focus group sessions was conducted synchronously using the online Adobe Connect® platform and an online conference call number. We chose a synchronous online focus group format to (a) accommodate employer schedules, (b) accommodate geographic diversity, and (c) provide a convenient data collection format. This methodology has been successfully used in health care research (Tates et al., 2009; Tuttas, 2014). Numerous benefits to online focus groups, including the points listed above, have been documented (Boydell, Fergie, McDaid, & Hilton, 2014; Walker, 2013).

The Adobe Connect platform allowed focus group participants to view PowerPoint slides of key questions and allowed participants to use a type/text chat feature. Employers could also synchronously communicate with the researcher via the conference line. We elected to use a call-in phone number instead of the built-in computer audio to eliminate the potential for audio feedback and other potential technical issues encountered by the employer's computer. Prior to starting each focus group, the research tested the online technology with each employer to ensure proper functioning. Each of the three focus groups was digitally recorded using the online platform-recording feature.

Three employers participated in the first focus group, five employers participated in the second focus group, and three employers were scheduled to participate in the third focus group, however only two logged in to participate. For each of the three focus group sessions, employers were instructed to log in to the Adobe Connect platform and call the conference number at the scheduled time.

After ensuring that each employer had a reliable connection and was comfortable using the online platform, the researcher began the 75-min focus group

by describing its purpose and reviewing basic focus group participation guidelines. Employers were then asked to (a) introduce themselves, (b) provide information about the type of business of industry in which they worked, (c) indicate their experience hiring people with disabilities, and (d) indicate if they were familiar with customized employment. After the introduction, the researcher asked employers about their thoughts about the customized employment video they had watched prior to the focus group. The researcher used this time to further describe the process and to answer and clarify questions employers had about the customized employment process. Employers in each group were subsequently asked a series of semi-structured questions designed to elicit their views about perceived barriers and facilitators to customized employment. Table 2 provides a list of semi-structured questions and probe sub-questions presented in each focus group.

2.3. *Research design*

Qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2013) was selected for this study because it allowed for small sample size and provided researchers the opportunity to inductively analyze focus group transcripts. Unlike a survey designed to gather general impressions from a representative sample of individuals, a qualitative design gathers in-depth information and analyzes responses from a small sample. Specifically, researchers used a standardized open-ended focus group interview method (Patton, 1990) with semi-structured "stem questions" followed by optional probe questions (Martella, Nelson, Morgan, & Marchand-Martella, 2013, p. 332). Use of standardized, semi-structured questions allowed researchers to efficiently manage interview time and maintain the same question list for each focus group. The questions were reviewed by researchers prior to the interviews and edited for clarity and business-friendly language. Potential probe questions were listed, although the researcher was free to insert other questions or omit questions depending on the context of the interview. The first author conducted each of the three focus groups.

2.4. *Data analysis and credibility*

Questions and responses in each focus group were digitally recorded. A research assistant unfamiliar with customized employment transcribed the recordings. Transcripts from each of the three focus groups

were uploaded to the Dedoose[®] qualitative analysis application and were analyzed to identify key emerging themes. Specifically, the first author conducted an initial review to highlight and identify statements by employers about their views of the customize employment process. The statements were organized according to each question and sub-question listed in Table 2. The first author conducted a second review of highlighted statements to code the statements and generate themes and sub-themes that reflected employer views of the customized employment process. During the second review, the first author also created memos about key points made by the employers. To ensure credibility, the second author independently reviewed coded transcript statements and reviewed the assigned themes to verify congruence between each independent review. The second author provided written feedback on all agreed-upon themes. For the few themes with disagreement, the second author provided written feedback. The authors subsequently reviewed these themes to make minor additions and deletions to achieve consensus.

3. Results

Table 1 presents information about the business, the industry type, the position of the employer, the number of employees working in the business, and the experience the employer has hiring people with disabilities. Ten employers participated in the three focus groups. Of these ten, eight employers indicated that only a high school education was necessary for entry level positions, one employer indicated a college degree was needed, and one employer indicated no education was necessary.

None of the employers had experience with the customized employment process. However, four employers had experience hiring people with intellectual and developmental disabilities using traditional methods. The employers who had hired people with intellectual and developmental disabilities rated their experience as good or average. Two employers indicated that individuals with disabilities they had hired performed the essential tasks very well, while two employers indicated that individuals completed tasks moderately well. Three employers indicated they would hire people with intellectual and developmental disabilities again while one indicated he/she would not hire again.

3.1. Themes

An analysis of the focus group interview data revealed a number of key themes and sub-themes related employer perceptions of customized employment, as well as potential barriers and facilitators that may arise during the customized employment process. Table 3 provides a list of each theme and sub-theme plus implications for practice for community rehabilitation professionals.

3.1.1. Business needs

Employers from all three focus groups indicated that learning about a particular business need was a critical component of the customized employment process. When employers discussed each of the questions posed to them during the focus groups, they frequently articulated that engaging/partnering with a business in various capacities to learn about business needs would improve the customized employment process. For example, when asked about what an

Table 1
Focus group participants

Business Description	Industry Type	Position	Number of Employees	Hired People with Disabilities*
Home Improvement Store	Retail	Human Resource Professional	101 or more	Yes
Cross Country Transportation	Transportation	Human Resource Professional	101 or more	Yes
Medical Billing	Healthcare	Human Resource Professional	101 or more	No
Design and Build Light Fixtures	Manufacturing	Human Resource Professional	76–100	Yes
Solar Panel Installation	Energy	Employment Recruiter	101 or more	
Business Incubator/Co-working Space	Technology and Information	Business Owner	1–25	No
Recruiting Company	Healthcare	Human Resource Professional	101 or more	No
Tire and Service Store	Retail	Supervisor	1–25	Yes
Online Cycling and Gear Store	Retail	Business Owner	1–25	No
Design and Installation of Fire Protection Systems	Construction	General Manager	1–25	No

*The question asked specifically about intellectual/developmental disabilities and autism.

Table 2
Focus group questions

Semi-Structured Questions	Probe questions
1. What factors would influence you and your business to customize jobs for people with disabilities?	1. How can an employment specialist learn about business needs?
2. What factors would prevent you or your business from customizing jobs?	2. What can employment specialist do to help employers learn about potential customized employees?
3. What are important characteristics that you would like to see from an employment specialist when they approach you to customize a job?	
4. If you made a decision to customize a job for an individual with a disability, what factors would you need to consider to maintain that customized job?	

Table 3
Summary of themes, sub themes, and implications

Theme	Sub Themes	Implications for Community Rehabilitation Programs
Business need	Engage/partner with employers	Convey value propositions
	Developing relationships	Training on business principles
Networking	Having a single point of contact	
	Provide employer with examples of past success	Training on business principles
Communication	HR/business experience	Attend business network meetings
	Face-to-face meetings	Conduct performance reviews
	Following-up to ensure task completion.	Develop performance reviews
Training	Capabilities of customized employee	Conduct thorough discovery activities
	Job try-outs	Educate employers about disability
Financial		Train employers on how to support customized employee
		Understand business principles

employment specialist can do to learn about business needs, one employer stated:

I would probably want that individual to come and spend multiple days working in all different aspects of the business and meeting with me so that they had a real true understanding of all the different layers and departments. We could actually brainstorm and come up with perhaps some creative employment areas.

Another employer indicated the employment specialist should “schedule time with the major department heads and then just literally be present and spend time within the organization - in different areas observing and taking notes.” Finally, another employer suggested that in order to start the process of learning about their business, the employment specialist should call the employer to schedule a brief visit at the business: “Maybe spend twenty minutes or a half hour just kind of going through a little bit of a tour of the shop and maybe just a quick explanation of what we do, and the kind of work that we do.”

In the context of learning about business needs, employers from all three focus groups indicated that employment specialists would need to spend time with a business to truly understand its expectations and needs. One employer suggested that

the employment specialist “should do a level of hands-on work themselves so that they understand the process.then [the employment specialist] would have the level of accountability of something that they put in place.” Two employers stated that employment specialists should be more creative during the customized employment process. Specifically, once a specialist learned about business needs, employers would like recommendations about how to improve overall productivity by creating a customized job. As one employer stated “one of the keys is to be creative in how to carve out a job. . .being able to say you have three different jobs here and we are going to take these little bits and pieces to create a new job.” The second employer wanted an employment specialist to “pay attention, ask good questions, and then think creatively about how to fashion a job.”

Several employers noted barriers related to learning about business needs. Specifically, employers expressed concerns about employment specialists trying to make a quick job placement and not taking time to comprehensively learn about their business. This barrier was exemplified by one employer who said “I have had staffing companies that come by frequently and it’s like they are trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, it does not matter what you are doing. . . .they do not take the time and energy

to understand the company.” Employers wanted the employment specialist to ask questions such as “what can we [employment specialist] do for you and how can we [employment specialists] help your company.” One employer indicated that his view about an employment specialist would be negatively skewed if that specialist did not take the time or make an investment in learning about the business.

3.1.1.1. Building relationships. The concept of building meaningful relationships with businesses was also embedded throughout the focus groups discussions. Employers from all focus groups suggested the long-term success of a customized employee would be improved if business relationships were established from the onset. When asked about what an employment specialist can do to learn about business need, one employer suggested an employment specialist must be “willing to understand what our [the business] needs and what barriers or hurdles are in regards to certain positions.” Another employer suggested that employment specialists take time to build relationships with the hiring manager to teach the manager how to work with people with disabilities so that the employer can provide direct support to the customized employee. During the relationship building process, another employer articulated that is important that the employment specialist understand the role of the community rehabilitation professional and be able to convey to the employer what that role is:

We actually had a provider come and speak to us and that person didn’t understand their business as well. They were here for a particular candidate but when the team asked questions they were not capable of answering.

This employer also explained that the employment specialist should have been prepared to provide information about what types of support the agency could provide the business. Another employer expressed that the relationship building process can be impeded by employment specialists who were too “pushy” or “can’t take no for an answer.”

3.1.2. Networking

Employers suggested that networking with businesses would help establish meaningful relationships. When talking about networking and the role of the employment specialist, one employer stated “I think it just comes down to being curious enough to fully understand the business.” The employer

further explained that this curiosity would help the specialist discover what types of positions might be carved out for people with disabilities and how the persons with a disability might benefit the business.

Employers also indicated that one way to establish relationships with businesses was to attend and present at local business organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) or local chamber after-hour events. One employer suggested that employment specialists could conduct a presentation about customized employment during a network luncheon. The employer recommended that during the presentation, the employment specialist should highlight the benefits of customized employment to meet business need.

When asked about how businesses can learn more about customized employment, five employers indicated they would like to hear about past successes with customized employment and how those successes can generalize to their business. For example, one employer articulated “I think they [employment specialists] would need to have some examples of past successes with other companies and show how they have worked for other companies.” Another employer suggested that testimonials from another business would provide information about how the customized employment experience positively contributed to the business. Similarly, another employer suggested that an informational video explaining the benefits of customized employment would help the learning process. This employer suggested the video should be personalized to show exactly how a customized employee could benefit the business and how the customized employee fits in. The employer stated that a video could provide “more substance to a pitch.”

3.1.2.1. Human resource or business experience.

When discussing networking, several employers indicated it would be beneficial if the employment specialist had HR or business experience. One employer suggested that an employment specialist with a HR background can more effectively “think outside the box.” Another employer stated that an employment specialist should have HR experiences so they understand employment law and the potential “potholes” that could be barriers to employment. Employers stated that they would like the employment specialist to have training or management experience and have someone who understands safety and regulatory guidelines.

3.1.3. *Communication*

Effective communication consistently emerged as a theme in each of three focus groups. The need for effective communication was exemplified by an employer who said, “you’re going to be needing to communicate to multiple different people in different environments and not just with the individual with disabilities.” One employer suggested the employment specialist serve as a liaison between the employer and customized employee and communicate with the employer about what components of the customized job are working and not working. When talking about effective communication, one employer said that an employment specialist needed to be intuitive and a good listener and articulated the employment specialist should “be able to just pay attention, ask good questions, and then just think creatively about how you [employment specialist] can fashion a job.”

Employers seemed to agree that face-to-face communication between the employment specialist and employer was an important component of success during the customized employment process. For example, one employer suggested that there be bimonthly “check-ins” between the direct supervisor and employment specialist to ensure that expectations were being met and to identify any areas that needed improvement. Several employers talked about having accessibility to the employment specialist and ensuring that the specialist conducted regular check-ins with the employer. These meetings would help ensure that specific components of a customized job were being considered such as “what are some of the challenges and what are some of the solutions.” Identifying these challenges and solutions during the negotiation process seemed to be an important consideration for the employer. Employers also wanted to have the options to provide feedback to the employment specialist about areas that need improvement. Finally, one employer said that he did not want an employment specialist to simply customize a job and move on to the next employer. Rather, the employer wanted someone who was accessible to the employer to address specific needs on an ongoing basis.

Another component of effective communication was the idea of following-up with the business to ensure the customized employee was completing identified employment tasks. One employer recommended that the employment specialist develop some type of performance review to “make sure that expectations are being filled and that they [customized employee] continue to be something that we

[employers] need.” Another employer suggested that the employment specialist conduct short “check-in” meetings with the employer to monitor how the customized employee was performing to determine if the employee was meeting expectations and if there were areas that needed improvement.

Employers from all three focus groups highlighted the need for an employment specialist to clearly articulate the capabilities of the customized employee. One employer stated it was important that the employment specialist “have a really good understanding of what the individual’s capabilities are” so the specialist can convey information to the employer. Another employer indicated that she would need to know exactly what the customized employee can offer and how those skills align with business needs: “It is hard for us being so small that we wouldn’t want to just create, you know, the position would have to be something that made sense and that was a need we needed to be filled.” Another employer suggested that an employment specialist present information about the perspective customized employee using a format different than a traditional resume. This information should highlight strengths and interests:

Present what someone’s strengths are, what their weakness are, and information about what they enjoy. That is something that we try to do anyways as we get new employees, as we get people going, we start to realize what employees are good at. . . Some people are good at some things that others are terrible. . . so you try to line people up with what their strengths are.

An employer indicated that he would like to have some type of summary package presented to him about the customized employee. The employer stated “we kind of do a discovery mode with all of the candidates that we are interviewing and we put together a summary package about why this person is a perfect fit for the position.”

3.1.4. *Training*

The idea of training emerged when discussing what factors would influence employers to customize a job for a person with a disability. One employer indicated that he would like the employment specialist to actually teach a person at the company how to work with a person with a disability. Another employer suggested he would like to know what types of funds were available for training an individual with a disability to assume a productive role in the business. Employers

also indicated that general training was needed on how to handle issues that they may not be comfortable handling.

Training also appeared to be a barrier in some instances. That is, one employer indicated the skill level of a person with a disability might be an impediment to employment because he or she may not be able to perform a task or the employer may need to provide “too much attention” to the person with a disability to perform the task. If the person did not have the capacity to do a specific task, or to learn the task, or required a lot of prompting to complete an employment task, the employer would not customize a job for a person with a disability.

When asked about factors that influenced employers to customize a job, employers recommended the person with a disability engage in some type of job try-out. One employer indicated his company used a contract-to-hire scenario where they “try the employee out before they fully invest in bringing that employee on as a full-time or permanent employment.” This employer suggested that this strategy would be useful in a customized employment scenario. Another employer also reinforced the idea of a job try-out and stated that such try-outs would help match a person to a particular job.

3.1.5. *Financial*

The financial implications of customizing a job were embedded throughout the focus group discussions. Employers seemed to struggle with the concept of job customization and what that meant for the business from a financial perspective. For example, one employer stated, “we do not have the funds to do it financially because we don’t have the extra padding or luxury for the extra labor.” The same employer said she would be open to customized employment if there was some type of incentive program such as a tax credit. Another employer indicated that the financial component would dictate whether they could customize a job because each department and job within the department had a strict budget. The employer indicated, “we can’t just create jobs because it sounds cool, it has a lot to do with our forecasting and productivity as a company.”

4. Discussion

This study sought to identify perceptions of employers regarding customized employment.

Transcripts from employers resulted in five major themes: (a) business needs (b) networking, (c) communicating, (d) training, and (e) financial. Employer perceptions about customized employment gleaned from the focus group discussions revealed that learning about business need was a priority for employment specialists who represent a person with a disability. That is, employers believed that is critical for an employment specialist to take the time to adequately learn about the operations of a business before they attempt to negotiate a job. Certainly, the notion of learning about business need before negotiating a job is one of the major tenants of the customized employment process and this idea is not new. For example, Gilbride and Stensrud (1990) described a demand-side model to increasing employment outcomes for people with disabilities. The demand-side model posits that employment specialists identify specific business need and strategies to improve productivity and financial position of a business. In addition, the model also requires an employment specialist to develop on-going relationships with the employer after placement is made and to solicit continuous feedback from the employer. An analysis of the focus group discussions made it clear that if employment specialists do not take time to learn about business operation and needs and fail to clearly convey the benefits of customized employment to employers, employers will not customize jobs. Employers indicated that they prefer to work with an employment specialist who had a certain level of business acumen and genuine interest in their business. The informational interview is one strategy espoused by customized employment experts that can be used to learn about business need. For example, Griffin, Hammis, and Geary (2007) suggest that the informational interview be used to seek information about a business, learn about the hiring practices of a business, discover specific opportunities to create or carve jobs, and learn about company culture. The authors recommend a general format for the interview that included a brief discussion with businesses, a tour, and wrap-up discussion.

Developing relationships with employers was another key ingredient to improving the customized employment process. The idea of building relationships with employers is reinforced in literature about employment of people with disabilities (Luecking, Fabian, & Tilson, 2004) but is not always practiced by employment specialists. For example, Migliore, Hall, Butterworth, and Winsor (2010) found a majority of

employment specialists used cold calls or classified ads to find job openings and did not use networking strategies to obtain jobs. The lack of relationship building during the employment process is certainly one variable that contributes to poor employment of people with disabilities. Using a customized employment framework, the relationship building process should begin during the discovery and negotiation stages and continue through placement (Griffin et al., 2007). Developing relationships and discovering employer needs will require an employment specialist to abandon traditional job development practices and use strategies that help the specialist become more knowledgeable about potential employers. During this process, the employment specialist must have the competencies to ask a number of key questions about the business to discover employer needs and in turn, match these needs to the strengths and interest of the customized employment job seeker. The employment specialist will also need to clearly convey to employers about how a customized job can meet the unmet needs of a business and ultimately improve the financial position of the business.

Making the business case for a customized job was reinforced in a statement made by one of the focus group employers. The employer indicated that she would not customize a job for a person with a disability if that person did not have capacity to do a specific task, to learn the task, or required a lot of prompting to complete an employment task. This employer's viewpoint is an example of why is critical that an employment specialist clearly articulate verbally or through a negotiated job description how a customize job will meet business need. Specifically, if a person with a disability is placed in a job where he or she does not have capacity to do a specific task, cannot learn the task, or requires a lot of prompting to complete an employment task, then that job is not customized.

Effective communication was critical to employers. The need for effective communication permeates all areas of the customized employment process from establishing contact with the employer, following up with the employer to ensure tasks are completed, and communicating about the capabilities of the customized employee. Each of these areas requires communication skills that facilitate ongoing constructive correspondence between the employment specialist, the employer, and the customized employee. In addition, employers expressed concerns about the financial implication of customized employment. To help alleviate these financial

concerns, an employment specialist will need to clearly convey how a customized job will improve a business. The financial position of a business is an important consideration because while community businesses often pride themselves on contributing or giving back to their community, they do not make hiring decisions based on goodwill (Luecking, Cuzzo, & Buchanan). Rather, employers make hiring decisions based on predictions about how a person they hire increases the financial position and overall productivity of a business.

5. Recommendations for practice

We recommend that employment specialists use value proposition to make the business case for customized employment. Barrington (2016) explains that value proposition is a method businesses use to convey how its products or services can benefit customers and suggests that businesses use value propositions to recruit perspective employees. The idea of value proposition can be generalized to the customized employment process of negotiating a job. That is, when an employment specialist takes the time to adequately learn about business need and matches all or part of those needs to the information gathered about the customized employee during discovery, the specialist can more effectively negotiate a job. During this process, an employment specialist should explain to the potential employer how the person with a disability can contribute to the overall needs of the business and improve the business financial position through personalized job description. The employment specialist should also describe the consultation services that will be provided to the employer.

Clearly, having the business acumen to convey the value proposition of customized employment will require skilled employment specialists. Research reinforces this concept and suggests that when employment specialist present employers with viable options that enhance business operations and options that add value to business, the employer will have more favorable views of people with disabilities working in their business (Luecking, Cuzzo, & Buchanan, 2006). In order for customized employment to be successful, the employment specialist must not only be skilled at finding a customized job that matches a person with disabilities strengths and interest, but must also be skilled at networking, communicating with employers and analyzing business needs to effectively negotiate a customized

job (Harvey, Szoc, Rosa, Pohl, & Jenkins, 2013). Therefore, we recommend that employment specialists will not only need targeted training on provisions of the customized employment process including discovery and negotiation; they will also need specific business-related training. Training should provide information about fundamental business principles such as financial positions, risk management, hiring processes, and business operations. Employment specialists who understand these principles can more easily make a business case for customizing a job that is based on the mutual need of the customized employee and employer.

Training should also focus on how to maintain a consulting relationship with a business after an individual has been successfully placed in a customized job. Similar to previous research (Fabian et al., 1995; Luecking, 2008), findings from this study show that employers are reluctant to work with employment specialists who seek only to place individuals into jobs and move on to the next case. Employment specialists should therefore be trained to follow-up with business on a regular basis to (a) ensure essential customized tasks are complete, (b) ensure employer and employee satisfaction with performance demands of the job, and, (c) examine business operations to incorporate new employment tasks as needed.

Finally, we recommend that employment specialists take steps to improve their relationship with local business entities through organizations such as local Chamber of Commerce, Business Leadership Networks, and other business network groups. Fostering and facilitating relationships with business groups will help employment specialists become more business savvy and will help businesses learn about the customized employment process.

6. Limitations of the research and future directions

Findings from the focus group research must be balanced against a number of limitations. First, only ten employers participated, thus limiting the generalizability of results to larger samples of business and industry. A focus group approach sacrifices generalizability of data for in-depth analysis of responses from a small sample. Now that information has been gathered from a small sample, future research should seek to engage large numbers of employers, perhaps by appealing to business organizations such as Chambers of Commerce to access their

memberships. Second, there was no comparison of employers with and without customized employment experience. Future research should investigate the differences between perspectives based on experience to gauge how attitudes change. Finally, we initially sought to identify employer perspectives on customized employment because so little had been reported in the research literature. We expected that employers would either view customized employment as more or less compatible with their business operations. Instead, what they reported were perspectives that, for the most part, cut across customized and supported employment processes. Other than assessment of employer needs, which is consistent with the tenants of customized employment and financial implications that may have run counter to the premises of customized employment, employers were focused on more general issues such as developing relationships and effective communication. Future research may want to begin with more extensive training of employers on the tenants of customized employment and how it differs from supported employment, then ask targeted questions to identify how well it aligns with business operations.

Conflict of interest

None to report.

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