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We Knew More Than We Could Implement

What historical employment workshops reveal about knowledge, practice and system design

> *"Knowledge hidden has no purpose."*

CDERP RESEARCH REFLECTION | NOVEMBER 2026 | DISCUSSION EDITION

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“Knowledge hidden has no purpose.”

The question

Why do employment systems continue to struggle with problems that practitioners, families, employers and researchers have recognised for years? A review of historical workshop materials suggests that the field has repeatedly identified many of the conditions that make employment participation possible. Yet recognising those conditions is not the same as having institutional arrangements capable of sustaining them.

The materials include a collection identified as 2024 workshop notes, a separate collection of other workshop material and six newly recovered pages provisionally associated with the 2024 collection. These are informal handwritten records, not a representative sample or a verified account of every discussion. The observations are interpretive and provisional.

What the workshops kept returning to

Early expectations and pathways

Employment should be treated as an ordinary possibility from school age. Notes call for engaged teachers, early work experiences, family conversations, career counselling and multiple future pathways aligned with life goals and priorities.

Employers as partners

Participants described employer trust, mutual benefit, small-business relationships, ongoing support and “Discovery for the Employer”. The recovered pages add employer informational interviews, job carving, environmental assessment and employer-specific information about supports.

Families, networks and confidence

The notes emphasise family knowledge, peer support, community connections, confidence building, respectful engagement and time to experiment. They acknowledge uncertainty and the possibility that an activity will not work out.

Practice is adaptive, not simply procedural

The recovered pages repeatedly mark proposed activities “remove”, “add” or “change”. Participants questioned blanket requirements in job preparation and assessment, distinguished family from employer enquiry, and proposed tailoring activities to individual circumstances. These markings record proposals and questions, not verified decisions or consensus.

Progress extends beyond placement

The additional notes propose ongoing career development, skills growth, increased autonomy, career satisfaction, personal outcome measures and regular reviews of whether support remains necessary and adequate. They also describe pre- and post-placement Discovery, orientation and support planning as continuing processes involving employers.

Organisations that enable judgement

Psychological safety, empowered staff, collaborative teams, initiative, honest communication and continuous creative thinking appear as conditions for good practice, not simply desirable workplace attributes.

Continuity across boundaries

Schools, further education, employment services, families, employers and funders all appear in the material. Yet no single institution is obviously responsible for maintaining the connections between them.

The gap between knowing and doing

A recurring pattern emerges: the field can name necessary functions without necessarily being able to assign durable responsibility for them. Someone must help build expectations, maintain employer intelligence, connect institutions, support informed risk-taking, respond when circumstances change and sustain relationships after a job begins. But who is authorised, funded and accountable to ensure these functions continue?

The newly recovered pages make the distinction between activities and functions especially visible. Removing a standardised task does not necessarily remove the need for enquiry, preparation or support; it may instead require professional judgement about how the function is best performed. This is an interpretation of the notes, not evidence that any revised approach was implemented.

Four ideas that deserve renewed attention

1. Expectations are formed through experience

Early opportunities may change what a person, family, teacher or employer believes is possible. This deserves investigation rather than assumption.

2. Employer knowledge is an enduring asset

“Discovery for the Employer” and the recovered references to informational interviews and job carving raise a question: can organisations build, verify and retain cumulative understanding of businesses and their changing opportunities rather than repeatedly starting with a vacancy?

3. Functional continuity matters beyond provider continuity

A person may move between education, disability support, employment programs and workplaces. The same provider need not follow them, but essential relationships, learning, opportunity knowledge and responsive support may still need to continue.

4. Progress requires more than activity completion

The recovered proposals invite examination of whether autonomy, career development, satisfaction and support adequacy provide more meaningful information about sustained participation than discrete service milestones. The notes do not establish which measures are valid or feasible.

What this may mean for systems research

The material resonates with several current lines of inquiry. ESME asks why systems can stabilise around persistent underperformance. Work on integrative employment functions asks what needs to connect across institutional boundaries. Emerging practice-system thinking asks how practitioners can reason, intervene, observe and adapt across programs without being confined to a single method.

These are contemporary interpretations, not claims that workshop participants anticipated or validated later frameworks. Historical notes can sharpen questions, illustrate tensions and challenge assumptions; they cannot independently establish causation or effectiveness.

A proposition for examination

Employment systems may underperform not principally because the field lacks knowledge of effective practice, but because arrangements through which support is commissioned, organised and delivered do not consistently sustain the functions needed to translate that knowledge into employment participation.

This proposition must be tested against other explanations, including resource limitations, evidence gaps, workforce capability, local labour-market conditions and variation in individual circumstances. It is a research agenda, not a settled conclusion.

Questions for practitioners, commissioners and researchers

- Which necessary employment functions are repeatedly identified but poorly owned?
- Where does useful knowledge stop travelling when a person crosses a program or institutional boundary?
- What organisational conditions allow professional judgement, experimentation and correction?
- How could employer knowledge be maintained without reducing it to vacancy transactions?
- Which measures capture sustained participation, autonomy, career progression, satisfaction and the adequacy of ongoing supports?
- When a standard activity is removed or adapted, how is its underlying purpose still achieved and evidenced?

From recurring observations to testable questions

A productive next step is not to convert these notes into another universal method. It is to identify recurring functions and ask how each is performed, supported, measured and sustained. The following are hypotheses for investigation, not workshop conclusions.

Expectation formation

Who creates early, credible opportunities to experience work? What happens when a young person moves from school to another service? Evidence could examine quality and follow-through, not just referrals.

Employer opportunity intelligence

Who retains what has been learned about employers, work design, local demand and emerging opportunities? How is this checked, updated and transferred when staff change?

Adaptive practice and professional judgement

When practitioners modify or omit a standard activity, what evidence shows that the person’s needs were understood and the intended function was fulfilled?

Relationship and support continuity

Who notices when an enabling relationship or condition is lost at a transition? What allows the next institution to respond rather than restart assessment?

Progress and career development

How might career satisfaction, autonomy, skills growth and support adequacy be observed over time, with the person's own priorities central to interpretation?

Accountability for integration

When a function falls between institutions, who has the authority and obligation to repair it? How can commissioners distinguish an activity delivered from a function sustained?

What the notes do not establish

These records are informal group artefacts. They cannot show how widespread any view was, whether a proposed action was attempted, or whether it improved outcomes. An "add", "remove" or "change" annotation is not proof of agreement. Some entries may represent disagreement, provocation or brainstorming. Dates, authorship and complete provenance require verification; the six newly recovered pages are provisionally assigned to 2024.

A practical invitation to the field

Readers are invited to contribute examples of functions recognised but not sustained, cases where continuity was protected and evidence challenging the central proposition. Contributions should distinguish observation from interpretation and avoid identifiable participant or employer information without permission. The aim is cumulative learning, not retrospective agreement.

Why share this now?

Returning to these notes does not mean claiming the past had all the answers. It acknowledges that people working in the field have long contributed important observations worthy of scrutiny, development and challenge. Knowledge hidden has no purpose. Knowledge shared can become a question, a connection, an experiment or a better decision.

Source and interpretation note

Based on preliminary photographic archives of handwritten workshop material, including a collection identified as 2024, other historical notes and six newly recovered pages provisionally attributed to the 2024 collection. Some handwriting, dates and provenance remain unverified. Short quoted phrases are drawn from visible notes; thematic synthesis and analytical propositions are the author's interpretation. No participant is presented as endorsing this contemporary analysis.

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From the CDERP Retreat

Practitioner insights that continue to inform our thinking

This reflection draws on workshop materials from the CDERP Retreat, including the 2024 Retreat and a related earlier collection. The Retreats bring together practitioners, service leaders, researchers, employers and family representatives to explore critical questions about employment, share experience and generate new thinking for the field.

Purpose and value

- Capture practical wisdom from the field
- Identify recurring insights and unresolved questions
- Inform and enrich CDERP's research, tools and system thinking
- Stimulate further discussion, evidence and action across the employment field

The materials reveal a consistent and enduring understanding of what supports meaningful employment — and highlight why many of these insights remain difficult to sustain within current system arrangements.

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