

# **The Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling Framework (PIE-CF)**

## **Establishing Ethical and Integrative Practice within Customised Employment Systems**

**Peter Smith**

Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice (CDERP)  
2025

### **Introduction**

Employment support is rarely a neutral technical activity. For many people entering employment services, work is associated with prior failure, stigma, institutional control, or repeated cycles of short-lived placement and loss. These experiences shape how individuals approach new opportunities, how risk is perceived, and how choice is exercised. Yet most employment systems are designed as if vocational decision-making occurs in psychologically neutral conditions. They assume that motivation, readiness, and confidence are available on demand, and that employment outcomes are primarily a function of skills matching and labour market access.

In practice, employment support is psychologically consequential work. It takes place within systems characterised by time pressure, outcome-based funding, and fragmented responsibility. These conditions create incentives that can unintentionally undermine participant agency and long-term sustainability. When employment planning is rushed, when options are narrowed prematurely, or when placement success is prioritised over alignment, ethical tensions emerge. Over time, these tensions contribute to disengagement, instability, and what can be described as stable underperformance across employment systems.

The Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling Framework (PIE-CF) was developed in response to this gap. PIE-CF articulates employment counselling as a distinct, ethically governed practice embedded within customised employment systems. It provides a way of understanding and delivering employment support that explicitly accounts for psychological safety, vocational identity, and longitudinal decision-making under real-world constraints.

### **Employment Without Psychological Infrastructure**

Across disability employment, youth transition services, and mainstream employment programs, poor outcomes are often attributed to individual limitations or labour market conditions. Less visible is the absence of psychological infrastructure within employment support itself. Many individuals engage with services carrying the cumulative effects of repeated rejection, compliance-driven assessment, or coerced participation. These experiences shape expectations and behaviour long before a new role is considered.

In transactional systems, these dynamics are frequently misinterpreted as lack of motivation, poor engagement, or unrealistic expectations. Standard responses include intensified

assessment, faster placement, or tighter compliance. While these strategies may increase activity, they often deepen misalignment between the person and the role, accelerating cycles of placement and loss.

PIE-CF begins from the premise that employment sustainability depends not only on opportunity and skill, but on whether individuals are supported to engage with work in ways that are psychologically viable. This requires practice models that can hold uncertainty, attend to relational dynamics, and protect choice under pressure.

## **Defining Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling**

Within PIE-CF, employment counselling is understood as a longitudinal, relational practice concerned with vocational meaning-making, ethical decision-making, and continuity across employment transitions. It is not therapy, nor is it case management. Rather, it is a form of counselling situated within employment contexts, focused on how individuals understand work, capacity, risk, and identity over time.

Psychologically informed employment counselling attends to the conditions under which people are able to explore vocational options without fear of coercion or failure. It recognises that apparent agreement may mask anxiety or resignation, and that genuine choice often requires time, trust, and iterative sense-making. Consent is treated not as a single decision point, but as an ongoing process that evolves as information, confidence, and circumstances change.

This form of counselling is ethically governed. Practitioners remain accountable not only for placement outcomes, but for how decisions are reached, how risk is distributed, and how power is exercised within the employment relationship. The integrity of the process is as important as the outcome it produces.

## **Relationship to Adjacent Practice Models**

PIE-CF occupies a distinct position relative to established vocational rehabilitation, career counselling, and case management models. Traditional vocational rehabilitation approaches often rely on assessment-driven sequencing and assumptions of readiness. While these approaches have value in structured systems, they are less effective in contexts characterised by fragmented pathways, insecure work, and complex vocational histories. PIE-CF rejects readiness as a prerequisite for engagement, instead supporting people to build understanding through experience and reflection.

Career counselling, by contrast, typically operates in environments of relative choice and stability. PIE-CF shares an interest in identity and meaning, but is designed for contexts of constraint rather than abundance. It integrates employer engagement, negotiated job design, and system navigation into the counselling process, remaining accountable for employment sustainability rather than decision quality alone.

Case management plays an important coordinating role but does not provide a framework for psychological engagement or ethical reasoning. PIE-CF complements coordination functions by addressing the internal and relational dimensions of employment that procedural models cannot reach.

## **Core Practice Logic of PIE-CF**

At the heart of PIE-CF is attention to psychological safety. Employment counselling begins by establishing conditions in which exploration is possible without threat or coercion. Practitioners attend to pacing, language, and power dynamics, recognising when system urgency risks overriding individual agency. This creates space for more accurate vocational understanding to emerge.

As safety is established, counselling supports vocational meaning-making. Work is understood not simply as a set of tasks, but as an activity embedded in identity, dignity, and belonging. For individuals whose work histories have been shaped by exclusion or failure, reconstructing a sense of vocational self is a critical step toward sustainable participation.

Choice and consent are treated as dynamic rather than static. PIE-CF actively resists premature foreclosure driven by funding timelines or outcome pressures. Decisions are revisited as understanding deepens, and alternatives remain open until alignment is sufficiently clear.

Risk is addressed explicitly rather than obscured. PIE-CF recognises that employment systems frequently displace risk onto individuals through insecure roles, unsupported placements, or unrealistic expectations. Counsellors hold responsibility for naming these risks, negotiating conditions of viability, and supporting informed decision-making.

Finally, PIE-CF is inherently longitudinal. Employment outcomes unfold over time, and sustainability depends on continuity of reasoning and relationship across discovery, job design, placement, and post-placement phases. This continuity counteracts the fragmentation that characterises many employment services.

## **Integration with Customised Employment**

Customised Employment provides a structured methodology for individualisation, discovery, and negotiated job design. PIE-CF functions as the psychological and ethical infrastructure that allows these methods to be applied with integrity. Within the Discovery process, counselling supports reflection and sense-making rather than mere information gathering. During employer engagement, it clarifies non-negotiable conditions and supports principled negotiation. Across placement and sustainment, it helps individuals interpret experience and adjust without defaulting to withdrawal or premature exit.

Without an explicit counselling framework, customised employment risks drifting toward technical matching or procedural compliance. PIE-CF anchors individualisation in relational practice and ethical intent.

## **System and Workforce Implications**

PIE-CF highlights a persistent gap within employment system design: the absence of a recognised integrative employment function. This function involves vocational sense-making under uncertainty, ethical risk management, and relational continuity with individuals and employers. In many systems, this work is delivered informally or invisibly, leaving it under-resourced and vulnerable to erosion.

Recognising PIE-CF has implications for workforce development. Practitioners require capability in counselling ethics, reflective practice, and systems literacy, alongside technical employment skills. Supervision and professional governance become essential components of service quality, not optional extras.

For policymakers and commissioners, PIE-CF provides a framework for legitimising employment counselling within funding and accountability models. It supports a shift away from short-term placement metrics toward measures that reflect sustainability, alignment, and participant experience.

## **Conclusion**

The Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling Framework articulates a dimension of employment support that has long been present but rarely named. Sustainable employment outcomes depend not only on labour market access or individual capability, but on the quality of vocational decision-making under pressure.

By embedding counselling ethics and relational practice within customised employment systems, PIE-CF offers a coherent response to the limitations of transactional models. It provides practitioners with a defensible framework, organisations with guidance for workforce design, and employment systems with a pathway toward more reliable, humane, and durable outcomes.

## **Citation**

Smith, P. (2025). *The Psychologically Informed Employment Counselling Framework (PIE-CF): Establishing ethical and integrative practice within customised employment systems* (White paper). Centre for Disability Employment Research and Practice.