

Customized Employment and Transition to Work for ALL Youth with Disabilities

Customized employment is a strategy that enables us to envision the possibility of paid community-based employment for all youth, especially youth with significant disabilities. Customized employment begins with the presumption that no one, regardless of severity of disability, is excluded; everyone is considered employable. What if schools began all IEP discussions about post school outcomes with the assumption that everyone would go to work after high school exit? And what if all Statements of Transition Services Needed discussed the coordinated set of activities that enabled students to move from school to paid community work and a rich full day in their community? What if the tools we used to assess students for the Age Appropriate Transition Assessments gathered information about their strengths, preferences, interests and support needs and these tools functioned to describe *how* they could best participate and contribute in a work setting rather than to identify where they don't measure up to their peers and identify the deficits that they need to remediate in order to work? Would the school day, work experiences, and ultimately, transition outcomes look different for many youth with a significant impact of disability?

The most common approach to getting a job is the labor market or competitive job development approach. This is the model that most school vocational programs use to prepare youth for employment. In the labor market approach the job procurement process begins with the employer. The employer identifies their needs, creates a job description to meet those needs, advertises the job opening, and then interested applicants apply for, and compete for the position. The employer compares each applicant's skills with the demands of the job position and compares each of the applicant's skills to one another. Youth and adults with a significant impact of disability don't compete well and therefore are not typically selected for employment using this approach. When assessment processes intended to measure whether or not youth are competitive for employment are used to assess youth with a significant impact of disability, these youth are typically screened out of employment and labeled as 'unemployable' or 'not ready' for community work.

The premise of customized employment is that individuals need not be able to compete in order to work. According to US Department of Labor, "customized employment" means individualizing the relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. Meeting the needs of the employer is critical. Employers will not invest in an employee unless that employee is making a contribution to the businesses' bottom line. In customized employment however, the employment conversation begins around the student's needs, strengths and interests, and the conditions under which they will be most successful rather than around the employer's needs. The student's contributions, skills and tasks serve as

the foundation of a job that is proposed and negotiated with an employer to meet specific needs of both parties.

This translates to the option of employment for youth with significant disabilities being designed considering their strengths; what works for them; and considering the factors, supports and/or accommodations that will enable them to participate fully in employment. The need to be 'competitive' or to demonstrate 'readiness' in order to work is eliminated. This approach fits with the intention of the Transition Individualized Education Program: the student's strengths, interests, preferences and needs are considered in relation to their post school outcomes. The strategies offered through customized employment such as Discovery, the Customized Employment Plan, Individualized Job Development and eventual negotiation of the job tasks, can enable the IEP team to visualize what each student can do for work.

Just because youth with significant disabilities have difficulty obtaining employment through traditional approaches, it doesn't mean that they can't work. It means that they need a different strategy to realize that they can make a contribution. Below is an example of a student who didn't compete well, but was very employable.

Katie is a young woman who is a great example of someone who would not have been considered employable without Customized Employment. Katie uses a motorized chair to get around school and the community. Katie uses an augmentative communication device to communicate. She requires personal care, assistance to transfer out of her chair, and help eating and performing other physical activities that she can't physically do. Initially her IEP team struggled with determining what types of vocational tasks she could do in the school building and in the community, and how she could work without someone with her at all times. At school she always had an assistant with her. If her team had used assessment tools that were comparative and evaluative measures to assess Katie's work aptitudes and interests, then the information learned about Katie would most likely have been a list of areas where she experienced deficits and was not independent. Instead the team used the strategy of Discovery to uncover where Katie was at her best, and what supports and strategies enabled her to be most competent and independent. The team spent time with Katie at her home and interviewed people in her life who knew her well. Several states including Virginia have directed their special education staff that Discovery and the Vocational Profile may be used to meet the Age Appropriate Transition Assessment (Indicator 13) requirement of IDEIA 2004.

In Customized Job Development, one begins with the job seeker's needs, contributions and strengths, then proactively approaches employers to propose a position that works for them and the job seeker. The employer responds to the proposal without comparing the job seeker's capabilities to other applicants or to an existing job description.

Without customized employment strategies, school teams may struggle to visualize how students with a significant intellectual delay, mobility impairment, communication barrier or challenging behaviors could work in the community. Many times it is assumed that students have to be 'ready' to work, meaning that they behave, their productivity is competitive, and they could work independently. These assumptions make community employment unattainable for many youth who aren't seen as ready to compete. Customized Employment brings the goal of paid, community-based employment as a feasible outcome of transition planning for youth with significant disabilities.

When the team began getting to know Katie in terms of what she could do for an employer they discovered the following: She spent time at home alone when her mom needed to work. She and her mom had created systems for Katie to call a neighbor or friend for assistance if her support staff didn't show up on time and she needed assistance. They ensured that everything from the phone to the dishes and appliances Katie used was within reach and accessible so she could be as independent as possible when home. Katie's mom was very descriptive and informative in communicating to the team Katie's abilities and support needs. She explained that Katie predominantly used her right hand and grasped items between her thumb and index finger. She could place and reach items on the second lowest shelves in stores to the top shelves as her chair raised and lowered. Her mom shared that Katie would frown and point to items in stores that were not in their correct locations when she was shopping.

Using Customized Employment strategies allowed the team to answer the questions: "What would work look like for Katie?", "What contributions could she make to an employer?", and "Under what conditions would she most likely be successful and independent?" These strategies prepared the team to make a proposal on Katie's behalf to an employer that enabled him to envision her as a contributing employee. She began her first paid job during the summer following her junior year in high school. The tasks offered to the employer included: providing information, directing people, putting things back in their place. The valuable contribution that she made to the employer was her commitment to ensuring items were put back where they belonged. The team negotiated supports from coworkers to help Katie load the tray of her wheelchair with items that needed to be returned to the floor as she was physically unable to reach down into the shopping cart to retrieve them herself. Her job crossed departments which was also a point of negotiation with the store and the job developer.

With the possibility of employment being a post school outcome for everyone, and the infusion of customized employment strategies in transition activities, vocational preparation for students in school should look different. Primarily, all students would have access to employment experiences in school and in the community. No student would be required to prove readiness for the next work experience; vocational staff would be expected to identify

characteristics of environments, supports and tasks that enable the student to be successful. Work experiences would be as individualized as necessary to enable all students to participate fully. Ideally, work experiences would follow a progression from exposure to work through the placement in a well-matched job, with needed supports in place, prior to high school exit. Shumpert, Callahan and Condon (2009) described an evolution of work experiences leading to paid employment for youth.

Vocational curriculum would also change. Instead of asking young adults to identify job titles when talking about 'what they want to be' when they grow up, it would be essential to introduce the concept that 'work' looks different and is unique for each student. Some youth choose to have jobs that are negotiated just for them or they may decide to develop their own business rather than pursuing existing positions. Competitive employment skills such as learning to complete applications, create resumes and interview would be augmented with training around skills more typically required in customized employment such as: requesting and negotiating accommodations on the job, development of task lists, and creation of visual resumes outlining skills, contributions, tasks and experiences as well as making a proposal to an employer.

Youth and their families play an important role in identifying and sharing information about the youth's skills and potential contributions, what works and doesn't work for them in employment settings and experiences, support strategies that enable them to participate fully and with the least amount of external support, and the factors that are necessary for them to be successful on the job.

This can be a very empowering exercise for youth with significant disabilities in order to increase their awareness of strengths, what works for them in employment, how to articulate what they need for accommodations, and how to identify and negotiate around, or avoid situations that they will struggle with. IEP teams will find that the conditions that enable the young adult to be most successful at work will also be relevant to other areas of their life such as; living in the community, accessing postsecondary education, and participating in the overall high school experience.

Through a progression of work experiences a student's contributions, skills, and tasks will be identified and support needs clarified. This depth of information gathered for each student will far surpass the traditional assessment of the competitiveness and/or need of long term support in work settings. This rich, detailed information about how each youth will participate in employment, and what types of environments are naturally supporting to the youth can provide a head start to the IEP team and adult agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation and Developmental Disabilities Services as they plan for transition from school to a community job. Theoretically, better job matches will reduce the individual's reliance on formal and costly

ongoing supports. At the very least, the depth of information learned about each student can lend itself to more creative ways to meet the young person's ongoing support needs. This information should be included in the Summary of Performance.

In summary, customized employment is important in transition planning in that it opens up the possibility of paid community-based employment for everyone regardless of the impact of their disability. Customized employment strategies enable school staff, families and youth to visualize each student working for a paycheck. Compiling adequate information about students their conditions to be successful in community employment before high school exit can lead to more successful job matches and less reliance on formal and expensive supports as they transition from school supports to adult agency supports.

Callahan, M. (2002). Employment from competitive to customized, TASH Connections 28 (9/10), p. 16-19. Condon, E., Callahan, M. (2008). Individualized career planning for students with significant support needs utilizing the discovery and vocational profile process, cross-agency collaborative funding and social security work incentives. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 28, (2), p. 85-96.

Shumpert, N., Callahan, M., Condon, E. (2009). Work Experiences and Paid Employment: Proposing an organized progression of distinct experiences that lead to employment for youth with disabilities. [Newsletter]. Missoula, MT: The University of Montana Rural Institute 6, (2), p.1-5.

Title 67 Fed. Reg. 43169-43182, 43154-43169 (June 26, 2002).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Public L. No. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. §§1400et seq.