

Defining Customized Employment as an Evidence-Based Practice: The Results of a Focus Group Study

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■ **A QUICK LOOK:**

Customized Employment for people with disabilities has been defined differently throughout the years, with the addition and restructuring leaving some wondering what is the true definition of Customized Employment? To develop a universal description and understanding of what customized employment consists of, the authors of this article conducted focus groups, diving into the key components of this practice. Here's what they found to disclose or not to disclose their disability and what considerations are made when making those decisions.

■ **KEY FINDINGS:**

Five focus groups were conducted involving a total of 28 professionals, including national experts and people who implement customized employment for people with disabilities. The phone-administered group conversations were analyzed to find similar themes with customized employment and the implementation of practices. The research revealed the following components or practices in customized employment:

- Physically meet at the location of the individual's choice
- Build rapport and get to know the individual; mindfully listen to them
- Identify the individual's interests, skills, and abilities; in-depth interviews with family and friends
- Observe the person during daily activities in different community settings -- observe the person in job-related tasks
- Arrange for the job seeker to observe local businesses that potentially match the job seeker's interests, skills, and abilities; conduct informational interviews with those employers
- Assist the job seeker in identifying a work experience(s) to refine/identify job interests, skills, and abilities
- Collaborate with the job seeker, family, and friends in confirming job interests, skills and abilities; and negotiate a customized job description.

■ **PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE:**

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 describes customized employment as "competitive integrated employment for an individual with a significant disability that is based on the strengths, needs and interests of the individual with the significant disability." It also states that it should be "designed to meet the specific abilities of the individual with a significant disability and the business needs of the employer." The key findings from the focus groups are consistent themes for customized employment from the people who are involved in its practices.

■ **MORE ABOUT THIS ARTICLE**

Here are a couple of direct quotes from the professionals involved in the focus group about customized employment practices:

- "You can't just ask some people what do you want to do, and they sit there and look at you, and then it's like you go back to the old bad practices of 'let me go see if I can figure out some job that I can put you in, because you say you don't want to or you don't know what you want to do.'"
- "There is skill involved in developing relationships with employers and determining unmet employer needs. You do not walk into a store and ask if they have any jobs for people with disabilities or any jobs in general. Instead you ask about how the store is run behind the counter or in the back of the store, you may find unmet needs."

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