

Disability and Rehabilitation Research Project

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Customized Employment Topic: Interviewing

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Conversation: an informal, usually private, talk between two or more people in which thoughts, feelings, and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, or news and information is exchanged.

(Source: Cambridge Dictionary)



Conducting interviews is usually a part of providing employment services to individuals with disabilities. Typically, there is an intake interview during which people seeking services are asked about their goals for employment and other relevant information. However, interviewing should not be used to “evaluate” the job seeker with disabilities, which is a very important distinction when using interviewing as part of customized employment services. Interviewing in the context of customized employment is a way to learn about a person’s life story and experiences. What meaning do these experiences have for the person and how may they impact employment?

Interviews can take a variety of forms such as structured with a list of pre-determined questions to more informal conversations with open-ended questions. Typically, interviewing for employment services has involved having a list of questions that the interviewer uses with little deviation from the “script.” When attempting to learn about a person’s life experiences for customized employment, a more informal conversational approach may be most effective.

However, talking with someone does not necessarily lead to a **meaningful** conversation. How questions are asked and how follow-up questions are phrased will impact whether the answers provide any insight to assisting a person in finding a job. The right questions may lead to “discovering” information that will assist in getting to know the job seeker. They can help the employment specialist uncover factors that may facilitate employment as well as issues that may be barriers.

“Being interested in others is the key to the basic assumptions underlying interviewing techniques.”¹ Being interested in the job seeker is fundamental to providing effective customized employment services. This involves putting aside any preconceived notions or assumptions about the individual and really listening to the person’s story.

Asking the Right Questions

Taking into account the individual’s life experiences, the person may have very limited information on which to base their answers to questions. It is not unusual for an employment specialist to ask a job seeker, “what do you want to do for a job?” However, most people who need customized employment may have never had a job or participated in work experiences. For instance, work activities at school may be limited to in-school opportunities such as helping in the cafeteria. Or, the same experiences are offered to all students and not personalized to each person’s specific interests. As an example, everyone in Mrs. Smith’s class goes to the local fast food restaurant to clean tables and help with stocking the condiment containers. Someone who only has opportunities doing janitorial tasks may respond that they want to clean at the fast food restaurant. Or, individuals who have only participated in facility-based programs, such as sheltered workshops, may answer “no” when asked if they want to work in a community job. Actually, these individuals may simply not know how to answer the question: “what job do you want?”

When conducting interviews, don’t fall into the trap of talking too much. In addition, don’t rush to fill up silent pauses. Waiting for the other person to answer a question is important. Don’t assume if the person pauses that he or she does not have an answer. The person may simply be thinking about the response. Rushing ahead to another question may be a missed opportunity to learn more. Also, don’t interrupt the other person, which may be interpreted as lack of interest in what the individual is saying.

¹Seidman, I. (2013). Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and social sciences (4th ed.). (pg. 9). New York: Teachers College Press.

Probe Questions: Having a list of questions to ask during an interview may help in getting the conversation started. However, sticking to a scripted set of questions could result in a very “stiff” discussion that does not yield much information. The employment specialist should be prepared to listen and ask follow-up questions as the person talks. These follow-up questions or “probe” questions may produce some of the most useful information. A follow-up question usually involves asking the person to provide more detail about what has been said.

For instance, a person might say that she likes to play with her dog. This response really doesn’t provide much information about what the person does with her dog. Following up with additional questions might provide insight into whether working with pets is an employment theme for the individual. Or, it simply might be that the person likes to spend her spare time with her dog. Many people say that they like pets or have pets, but this does not mean that they want a job that involves working with pets. The following table presents some ideas about how to follow-up with probe questions related to playing with pets.

Table 1: Sample Follow-Up Questions

The person states that she likes to play with her dog.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me more about playing with your dog. What do you do when you are playing? • What do you like about playing with your dog? • Have you ever played with other people’s dogs? Tell me about that. • What else do you and your dog do? Can you give me an example? • Does anyone help you when you play with your dog? How do they help you?
The person responds that she walks her dog. Additional probe questions about walking the dog may reveal information on the person’s travel skills.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does anyone help you? How does (person’s name) help you? • When was the last time you and your dog took a walk? • Can you tell me more about where you and your dog go for a walk? • Have you ever walked the dog by yourself? Where did you go? • What is the best thing about taking your dog for a walk?

Closed Ended and Open Ended Questions:

Another consideration is to ask questions that are open ended rather than questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Questions that can be answered with a yes or no are referred to as closed ended questions. For example, asking “what do you do in your free time” may provide more information than asking, “do you have any hobbies?” Open ended questions may include words such as describe, explain, give me examples of, tell me about, and so forth. Consider using the words: who, what, where, when, how, or why when asking open ended questions. The questions in Table 1 offer some examples of asking open ended questions. Table 2 below compares closed ended questions to open ended questions.

Table 2: Comparing Closed and Open Ended Questions

Closed Ended Questions (Yes / No)	Open Ended Questions
Do you have any hobbies?	What do you do in your free time (on the weekends)?
Do you like to go to the soda shop?	Tell me what you like to do at the soda shop.
Do you play games on your iPad?	Describe how you use your iPad to play games? Tell me about the games that you play on your iPad.
Do you spend time with friends?	Tell me about your friends. What do you do when you get together?

Questions About Life Experiences:

Employment specialists new to customized employment may wonder why asking job seekers with disabilities about their life experiences or daily activities is relevant to employment. As previously mentioned, the person may have little experience with work and asking questions about working may yield very little information. For instance, an employment specialist might ask the person what time of day he or she would like to work. Alternative questions may include asking what time the person gets

up in the morning, goes to bed, or participates in regularly scheduled activities. If the person always meets friends at the gym on Thursday and Saturday from 2:00 to 4:00 pm, then scheduling work at that time may be an issue. As another example, the person may say that he likes to play games on an iPad. "Playing games" requires a wide variety of skills from simply looking at the iPad to interacting with other people such as playing scrabble word games that require reading and spelling skills. Learning about the job seeker's daily activities can provide a great deal of valuable information about the person's functional skills as well as about the supports that people in the person's life provide.

Selecting the Best Location

Where an interview takes place may have as big of an impact as how the questions are asked. If the person is not comfortable, the employment specialist may ask questions but not get useful answers. It is not unusual for meetings to take place in the agency's office. But, this might not be the ideal location for putting the person at ease and having a conversation about employment.

When providing customized employment services it is recommended that the employment specialist meet with job seekers in their homes.

When providing customized employment services it is recommended that the employment specialist meet with job seekers in their homes. There are a number of reasons for this recommendation besides making sure that the individual is at ease. Meeting in the person's home may provide as much information as the interview itself. Photographs or items in the home can provide a way to start a conversation and get the person talking about something familiar. Observing what is in the home also may reveal interests and skills that develop into an employment theme. For instance, the employment specialist may notice audio equipment in the home that stimulates a conversation on the person's musical interests. Seeing the equipment may prevent the employment specialist from assuming that listening to music is just a hobby. As another example, an employment specialist learned by going to a job seeker's home that he spent a great deal of time in his grandfather's woodworking shop assisting with wood projects. This may never have come up in conversation if there had not been a meeting scheduled in the home.

Sometimes, an employment specialist may not feel safe going to the neighborhood where the job seeker lives. Alternative locations where the person participates can be discussed or perhaps two employment specialists can meet with the individual, family members, or other advocates. If the person asks to meet at a location other than home, the setting should be one where a confidential conversation can occur. Typical integrated community settings are recommended rather than segregated programs. As another example, a job seeker might suggest meeting at a restaurant, but that may not provide a confidential setting. Try to identify a place where the person participates in activities that can also provide a confidential area to meet. As the employment specialist becomes trusted, the job seeker and the family may be comfortable with having a meeting in the home.

Selecting Who to Interview and How Many

When conducting interviews, it is important to interview individuals in the person's life that can provide detailed information. The goal is to gather a range of opinions and varied views of the job seeker's interests, skills, and preferences. Interviewing should focus on collecting "rich" information rather than how many interviews are conducted. The number is not as important as the adequacy of the information collected for identifying the job seeker's employment themes.

Consider the following when deciding who to interview. Where does this person participate in activities? What family members and friends does the person spend time with daily or at least regularly? This may include family members, friends, neighbors, case managers, vocational rehabilitation professionals, teachers, and advocates. As with interviews with job seekers, employment specialists should go to the people being interviewed rather than bringing them to the agency. In addition, be sure to confirm with the job seekers who is to be interviewed and obtain permission. Most agencies have release of information consent forms, and employment specialists should not contact people for interviews without following the agency's protocol.

Employment specialists may wonder if the information that they obtain from the job seeker is accurate and representative of the person's skills and interests. The purpose for interviewing more than one or two individuals in the job seeker's life is to

confirm information from multiple sources. In addition, different people may have very different experiences with the job seeker and participate in different activities that provide valuable information on the person's skills and interests.

There is no "cookbook" answer as to how many interviews need to be conducted and exactly who should be interviewed when providing customized employment services.

Interviewing multiple people also helps the employment specialist know when to stop interviewing. In other words, after conducting a number of interviews, the employment specialist will begin to hear the same stories or comments and stops learning new information. It is important not to draw out the time that is spent interviewing and delay moving beyond discovery activities. The goal is to have enough information to identify employment themes that the job seeker and employment specialist can explore moving on to conducting informational interviews and participating in job shadow experiences within businesses. Table 3 below provides a case study example of a young woman who met with an employment specialist in her home. During the interview, the employment specialist asked if she had any hobbies. The mother went into another room and brought out a box that contained various art projects. The art projects were simple, and it would be easy to assume that art would not be an employment theme for the young woman but a hobby. However, it is important to dig deeper and ask more questions.

Table 3: Interview Case Study Example

Case Study
Mary met with her employment specialist at home for their first meeting. She talked about liking "art." Her mother brought out a box of projects to show the employment specialist, which included ceramic pots and abstract watercolors on inexpensive paper. <u>Assumption:</u> Mary might like art, but this is obviously a hobby.
Putting Assumptions Aside by Asking Follow-up Open Ended Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When Show me the last art project you made in this box? When did you make it?• What is your favorite thing about making / painting _____?• Tell me about where you made/painted the _____ (picture or pot)?• When was the last time that you went there?• What is your favorite thing about going to the ceramic/art studio?• Tell me about the people you have met there?• Describe what you do with the other people who go there.• Does anyone help you when you make your art? How do they help you?• Describe other things that you do in the art studio other than making pots. Etc.
Comments:
These sample questions demonstrate how having a conversation may lead to learning more about this young woman's skills and interests. In this example, the employment specialist learned that the young woman regularly went to a ceramic studio. It would be important to pursue whether the owner of the studio could be a connection to other businesses (social capital) for this young woman. Typically, this may have otherwise been overlooked or left uncovered. Discovering her art interest led to observing the young woman at the studio and an informational interview with the studio owner. There the employment specialist learned more about job duties that matched the young woman's skills. Employment specialists cannot be familiar with all the possible work tasks within businesses and observing and conducting interviews within business can lead to expanded job opportunities.

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If you have questions about this "Customized Employment Topics Sheet" or about the VCU DRRP on Customized Employment, please contact:

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