

Customized Employment for People with Physical Disabilities

Research has documented clearly that the employment rate of adults with disabilities is far lower than that of adults without disabilities. The U.S. Department of Labor (2012) reported that in 2011 the employment rate for individuals with disabilities was 7.8% compared to 63.6% without disabilities. Moreover, eight of ten individuals with disabilities were out of the labor force (i.e., not working and not seeking work) compared to three of ten among non-disabled adults. Findings from the American Community Survey show that respondents with disabilities reported a 33.4% employment rate across all disability categories; however, those with ambulatory disabilities reported a 24.3% employment rate, self-care disabilities 16.2%, and independent living 15.8% (Schur et al., 2009).

Individuals with physical disabilities may not be able to perform all the essential functions associated with many existing job descriptions. Due to physical challenges and other barriers, they are left out of the labor market or left to settle for jobs that do not match their unique interests, skills, and abilities. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) reported that 80.5% of individuals with disabilities who reported barriers to employment indicated that their own disability is a barrier.

One strategy that is showing promise to facilitate employment outcomes for individuals with physical disabilities is customized employment (CE). Virginia Commonwealth University's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC) on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities is researching the impact of customized employment on the unemployment of individuals with physical disabilities. This Q and A Fact Sheet is one in a series on strategies designed to answer frequently asked questions on how to support individuals in achieving their employment goals.

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**QUESTION: What is customized employment?**

ANSWER: The Federal Register defines customized employment as a blending of services and supports. Customized employment may include --- job development or restructuring strategies that result in job responsibilities being customized and individually negotiated to fit the needs of individuals with a disability (Federal Register, June 26, 2002, Vol. 67, No. 123 pp. 43154-43149). Customized employment is based on the match between the unique strengths, needs, and interests of the job candidate and the identified needs of the employer. CE starts with Discovery, which is the identification of the individual's needs, strengths, and interests. The next step is custom-



ized job development that includes negotiating a job with a business that matches the job seeker's needs, strengths, and interests leading to an employment proposal. After a job has been negotiated, individualized job site supports are provided as needed. A personal representative / employment specialist may assist in providing on-the-job training and facilitating supports in the workplace. Job site supports for individuals with physical disabilities may also include personal assistance services, natural supports, and other accommodations including assistive technology.

QUESTION: What types of jobs can be customized?

ANSWER: The types of jobs that can be customized are only as limited as the interests of the job seeker, the willingness of a company to hire the person, and the creativity of the employment specialist or negotiator. During the initial stages of working with the individual with a physical disability, it is important to identify the person's interests as well as skills. This has been referred to as "discovery." Negotiating a job for someone that does not match the person's interests most likely will be unsuccessful in the long term. However, it is not sufficient to simply identify the person's interests or hobbies. While the person may really enjoy movies, it does not mean that he or she would be satisfied working at the local theater collecting movie tickets! Or, the person may enjoy painting but not want to create a business selling artwork. In other words, the discovery phase is critical to ensure that the person's interests and skills are clearly identified. Some of this may involve determining the person's negotiable as well as the non-negotiable aspects of employment.

Once the individual's job goals are established, potential businesses can be identified by networking with family, friends, and neighbors; contacting local business associations such as the Chamber of Commerce; reading the business section of the local paper; and using knowledge of the local job market. Employers targeted on behalf of the individual should be selected based on a match between the job seeker's expressed skills and interests and type/nature of the company. This customized approach allows for the job seeker with physical disabilities and the personal representative to negotiate job duties that match the individual's skills. In other words, the approach results in a negotiated position for which the individual is qualified.

QUESTION: How can the personal representative/employment specialist determine an employer's needs?

ANSWER: Negotiations require spending time with employers. During this period, a relationship can be developed and needs identified. The employment specialists should encourage an employer to share thoughts and feelings by asking for feedback on what is discussed. The negotiator's responsibility is to ask questions that will uncover the employer's needs and interests that can then be matched with the needs and interests of the job seeker with a physical disability. If the employment specialist creates a receptive climate, he or she is more likely to establish a relationship leading to a negotiated position.

Observing business operations and asking key questions may lead to discovering opportunities for customizing a job. For example, some of the following questions may be asked. Do employees have duties that take time away from their main area of expertise? Do you routinely pay overtime or need temporary work services? Are there tasks that do

not get done or that you would like to see done more often? The employment specialist must also be ready to probe below the surface. What's your real need here? What values are important to your company? What's the outcome or result that you want? The answers to these and other questions can lead to cooperative problem solving. This in turn may trigger discussions about negotiating a job description.

If an employment specialist and/or job seeker are unfamiliar with the types of opportunities at a specific company, an informational interview may be useful in uncovering potential jobs. An employer could be approached for an interview asking for information on the company versus specifically hiring someone with a physical disability. This informational interview may result in other ideas for employment and job leads that are not necessarily with the company providing the interview.

QUESTION: How can an employer be convinced to customize a job for an individual with a physical disability?

ANSWER: The negotiator's first responsibility is to ask questions that will uncover the employer's needs that can be matched with the needs and interests of the job seeker with a physical disability. Some of these questions have been mentioned in the previous answer. The next step is to develop a proposal for presenting to the employer. The proposal describes the aspects of customizing an individualized job description that meets the needs of the business and the needs of the job seeker. Included in the proposal are the standards for work performance. For individuals with physical disabilities, this may mean crafting a new job description for a position that is tailored to meet the unique skills and abilities of the individual.

Personal representatives / employment specialists must believe that individuals with significant disabilities can make valuable contributions to businesses. Included in the proposal should be a description of an individual's contributions such as how customizing a position can save money and time, get tasks completed that are typically not done or not done often enough, and in general enhance the company's operations. Identifying how the new employee will make a valuable contribution is the key to sealing the deal. If the employment specialist is convinced that the individual can enhance the company's operations, then he or she should be able to convince the employer!

QUESTION: An employer may be willing to hire a person with a physical disability based on his or her production. Is it acceptable to negotiate less than minimum wage if this means getting the person a job?

ANSWER: No, it is not acceptable to negotiate a job at less than minimum wage. First and foremost, everyone should earn a wage that is comparable to the other employees of the business. One of the values of customized employment is that the job seeker earn at least minimum wage and preferably more based on the job duties that have been negotiated. Remember, the concept is to add value to the business while obtaining a job of choice for the individual. The person should never be represented as less valuable than any other employee of the company.

QUESTION: If this is true, then wouldn't the company's production standards be a barrier to finding jobs for people with physical disabilities? How can this barrier be overcome?

ANSWER: As previously mentioned, customized employment includes developing an employment proposal. Included in the proposal is a description of how the business can benefit from hiring the job seeker. It is recommended that part of this proposal include a negotiated production rate for the new employee if the targeted job duties have a pre-determined production standard. This standard can be determined based on the person's abilities and becomes an individualized or customized production standard. An employer may be receptive to this, because the new employee is meeting a need of the business. For instance, a company may have data entry tasks that are assigned to other employees as they have time. These tasks may not get completed consistently, but if someone were to do this regularly, the company benefits. This benefit might be in saved time by other employees or a financial savings to the company. The key here is to determine what the employer needs and how this matches to the interests and skills of the job seeker.

QUESTION: Don't people with physical disabilities need assistive technology to become employed? Shouldn't technology be identified before the job search begins? In other words, wouldn't it be easier for people with physical disabilities to acquire and learn how to use technology before they are placed in community jobs?

ANSWER: Many individuals with physical disabilities use assistive technology (AT) in their daily lives. For that matter, most of us use technology every day that makes work easier. However, if the person is not already using technology, identification and training may delay the job search. In addition, the "right" technology may not be selected. The identification of a person's career goals and interests is the first step to successful employment. Attempting to determine a person's technology needs prior to knowing the person's interests can result in the purchase of assistive technology or skill training in the use of a device that does not translate to a competitive employment position. In other words, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to identify assistive technology devices without knowing what the person wants to do. An individual may learn to use AT as a prerequisite to employment that is not compatible with or needed for the negotiated job duties. Learning how to use the technology on the job is recommended if the person is not currently using assistive technology.

Certainly, it is not recommended to delay acquisition of technology that in general would make the person's life more productive. Devices that allow the person to be more independent may certainly transfer to work. In other words, technology that is functional in other aspects of the person's life should be considered at any time including when seeking employment. The caution here is the identification of technology for the sole purpose of finding a job without knowing what the person wants to do.

QUESTION: How will an employment specialist determine if a person will be able to physically complete job duties when working with an employer to customize a position?

ANSWER: Asking questions and informal observation can provide a wealth of information to include physical abilities and personal care support needs. Ideally, interviews and observations should take place in a setting of the person's choice. Functional activities for observation may include going out to dinner, going shopping, attending a community event or other

activity selected by the job seeker. Functional activities can be part of discovery that involves learning about the person's skills, interests, and career choices.

Using an activity selected by the job seeker with a physical disability can provide insight into potential support needs. The employment specialist or personal representative can evaluate if the individual is able to select an activity of interest, set up and arrange a way to get to the location, use his or her wheelchair independently, use public or private transportation, and so forth. For someone with a physical disability, the employment specialist will be able to observe the individual's physical capacity.

If the individual chooses to go out to eat, the employment specialist can learn about his or her potential personal assistance needs in the workplace. For instance, the employment specialist will learn if the individual can maneuver a wheelchair in a confined space, manipulate the menu, use utensils for eating or drinking, as well as other personal care support needs such as taking off a coat or using the restroom. This observation can provide beginning insight into how much physical assistance or technology the individual may need on a job site. Visually being able to picture the person's mobility skills will assist the employment specialist when he or she is negotiating a customized job. The employment specialist will be able to consider how the person's skills can be matched to a job, given assistive technology and other workplace accommodations, as well as key information provided by the individual. Without this knowledge, a person may be "matched" to a job that is physically incompatible even with the application of assistive technology services and devices.

If the employment specialist does not feel qualified to assess the person's physical abilities, an occupational or physical therapist may be identified to provide information. The services of an OT or PT can be paid for by vocational rehabilitation (VR) if the job seeker is receiving VR services and supports. Evaluations are still recommended in community settings or during functional activities regardless of who is conducting the assessment.

QUESTION: Who pays for the customized employment?

ANSWER: Customized employment services and supports can vary greatly based on individual need and the nature of the employment goal. There are many different potential sources funding the services under a customized employment plan. Each individual's funding sources may differ. A team approach is the most effective method to identifying and securing needed funding resources. Frequently, customized employment plans are funded by blending together a variety of monetary resources. Therefore, a variety of agencies and programs can be involved in funding customized employment services. If an individual is a client of the state vocational rehabilitation agency, services and supports can be funded by VR. The service and supports must be included as part of the job seeker's Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) in order for this funding source to be used. Medicaid Waiver dollars are another possible source of funding for eligible individuals. Since vocational rehabilitation funding ends when the VR case is closed, Medicaid Waiver funding can be a source of ongoing support funding after case closure where continuous customized support is needed. Plans for Achieving Self Support (PASS) through the Social Security Administration are another potential funding source. Employers may cover the cost of assistive technology as accommodations when needed by the individual after he or she is employed. Local United Way funding and also support through One Stop Career Centers are other potential sources.

QUESTION: Will everyone with a physical disability need customized employment?

ANSWER: No, not everyone with a physical disability will need the intensive supports that are available with customized employment. While there are no specific guidelines currently as to who is best served, typically individuals with the greatest support needs may benefit the most. This would include someone who is uncertain about what he or she wants to do, has limited to no work history, will need a negotiated job description, and will need on-going supports to be successful.

SUMMARY

This Q and A Fact Sheet has answered some commonly asked questions about customized employment for people with disabilities. There are many more questions that remain to be answered. In fact, the VCU-RRTC will be conducting a research study on customized employment for people with physical disabilities. This includes the development of a Customized Employment Fidelity Scale and a replication manual to be used by vocational rehabilitation professionals and other direct support staff for assisting people with physical disabilities in becoming employed. Interested individuals should contact the VCU-RRTC for additional information.

RESOURCES

Griffin, C., Hammis, D., & Geary (2007). *The job developer's handbook: Practical tactics for customized employment*. Baltimore, Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Co.

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**For more information on the VCU-RRTC, please visit:
<http://www.worksupport.com/rrtc>**

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