

VCU-RRTC on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities

Research Study #3: Customized Employment as an Evidence-Based Practice to Improve the Employment Outcomes of Transition-age Youth with Physical Disabilities



Customized Employment as an Evidence-Based Practice: What are Informational Interviews

Introduction

The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities conducted a series of focus groups with recognized national experts and implementers of customized employment. The objective of this qualitative research was to develop of a description of customized employment that agencies can use when supporting individuals with disabilities. Twenty-eight professionals representing national experts and implementers of customized employment participated. The calls were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify themes associated with customized employment implementation. The research provides insight into the practices that are associated with customized employment that facilitate integrated employment outcomes. This research brief focuses on informational interviewing as reported by these participants.

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Question: What is an informational interview?

An informational interview is a business term that is being used to describe an essential element of customized employment. The purpose of an informational interview is to learn about a potential career when information is not readily available. They are informal conversations with people who work in the area or career of interest. An individual who wants to learn more about a chosen field identifies people who are willing to talk about their careers or jobs. When used as a customized employment practice, the focus is on getting to know a business in a similar way that discovery focuses on getting to know a job seeker.

Informational interviews may help the job seeker and the employment specialist learn more about how the person's interests and skills may meet the needs of business. One focus group of implementers discussed how informational interviewing can guide people who support the job seeker to focus on a specific individual's interests. When asked how customized employment differs from other approaches to finding people with disabilities a job, one participant in the group stated the following:

I think that the way we approach employers is completely different... this whole approach of informational interviewing and not assuming you know what an employer does.... but actually getting in there and learning about businesses.

Question: How do you identify businesses where you can conduct informational interviews?

Businesses are selected, because they represent a specific job seeker's interests or "vocational themes." In other words, a business is selected for an informational interview based on what was learned about a specific job seeker during discovery. Discovery considers who the individual is first, and then businesses are identified



where informational interviews can be conducted. Typically, job developers have approached job development by canvassing businesses to find available jobs. Then, they review the individuals on their caseload's and decide who might be interested in that type of work. One participant described this by saying the following:

[Informational interviews are] really focused on [a specific] person and their interests. Because what we've found when we used traditional job development was that, you know they would then pick the person at the top of their list that they viewed as having the most skills, and that person always getting the job.....So by using this process, it's really about that person and gathering information that's going to benefit that individual job-seeker versus did I find a job here that I can plug somebody into.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Question: What are vocational themes?

Vocational themes areas of interest for a job seeker that guide a job search. They should be broad such as an automotive theme versus cars, which facilitates brainstorming of possible businesses to target. A list of places where people work in the community that have an interest in a specific theme is then generated. One participant stated:

So these themes are general ideas not really specific. They are broad in nature, and with those themes in mind you go through the process of brainstorming a list, of ideally for each theme,.... places for where there could be something, not specific job duties, but where there may be some kind of work along the lines of the person's skills and strengths.

Social capital is a way to identify businesses on behalf of a specific job seeker. Social capital are resources acquired from interactions between people or networks of people. Employment specialists may use their own social capital to identify businesses and should not forget that the family and friends of the job seeker have social capital as well. This extends to coworkers within an agency or other social networks that people belong to in their communities. These connections create opportunities to learn more about potential work within businesses. Two different participants in the focus groups described using social capital in this way:

One of his themes is culinary, cooking, and we've done some things with him.I have a friend whose father owns a food truck..... So, I reached out to my friend and I asked him if it would be OK if I brought _____by to meet his father, it's an informational interview..... and it was just me happening to know someone who had something. So that is social capital.

I went to one church [where] I happened to know the pastor, [and] started talking about this woman's interesttalking about what she can do, very slow, data entry...She drove her electric chair by joy stick but not very well so she kind of needed very large halls and to not bump into people and things. Anyhow, the pastor identified that they were in the process of transferring all the information onto the computer of their history. He didn't care how quickly it went, but he needed it done....unbeknownst to me, she went to that church and the pastor remembered her. She got hired.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Question: Do you have any suggestions on how to conduct an informational interview?

Think about an informational interview as a conversation with an employer to learn more about the work that is done at the business. The employment specialist is not going into the business to ask about available jobs. The goal is to gain information on the types of work that employees complete in order to determine if a specific job seeker's vocational goals potentially match the business. Two different participants in the focus groups described an informational interview this way.

We avoid the whole: I'm here for a job discussion and just get to know the business better.

Working with employers [is] a very different approach. It begins from the idea that.....I want to learn about your business. Not, I'm here, because I want you to hire somebody. So you're going in some sort of sense talking about the unknown. I don't know what I'm going to find. You are on a mission to learn and so then with that approach you gather information.

Developing a set of questions to guide the conversation can be helpful. Questions should be open ended requiring a response from the individual using information that he or she has. In contrast, closed ended questions are ones that can be answered with “yes” or “no”, which usually do not facilitate a conversation. However, it is not recommended to use a checklist of questions by going down the list and writing down the answers. This type of exchange may inhibit the conversation. Take a few notes on what is discussed if needed but pay attention to the conversation rather than writing down everything that is said. The table below provides some suggestions for questions. Employment specialists should modify these using their own words so that the discussion flows naturally.

Informational Interview Sample Questions
What are you the most proud of in your business operations?
What keeps your business operating smoothly? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Probe questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can you think of anything that would improve the workflow in your business? ○ Are there times of day when the workflow does not go smoothly? What would improve the situation?
Is there a product or service that you would like to provide that you aren't currently? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Probe questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is limiting/keeping you from providing _____ (state the product or service)? ○ Do you have a target date for when for providing _____ (state the product or service)?
What is innovative about your business? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Probe questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Who is leading the innovations? ○ What resources do you need to continue _____ (state the innovation that the employer has described.)
How are you making improvements at your business? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Probe questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Who is leading the improvements? ○ What resources do you need to continue _____ (state the improvements that the employer has described.)
What plans do you have to grow your business? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Probe questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is your biggest barrier to growing your business? ○ How can the barrier be removed or reduced?
What are the stressors that you or your employees are experiencing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Probe questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can you think of ways that the stress could be reduced?

NOTE: VCU would like to acknowledge Cary Griffin for the Informational Interview Questions in this table.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Question: Do you have any other ideas on how to prepare for an informational interview?

Employment specialists can learn about a business in many different ways before conducting an informational interview. Obviously, if someone has recommended a company, then asking that person questions about the business operations is a good idea. Researching information online is also another way to learn more about the business's products or services. Appearing interested and knowing something about the company before going there can make everyone more at ease in an unfamiliar situation. In addition, an employer may be impressed if the job seeker and employment specialist can discuss the business in a knowledgeable way. One participant talked about how he/she liked to learn more about a business before conducting an informational interview.

Before I do my informational interview, a lot of times I like to go in kind of as a secret shopper, to actually go in as a customer if possible. I think the businesses always appreciate you buying their goods or using their services. Also, it really kind of gives me an idea of what's going on in the business and if there are maybe places where they could improve..... I would know it first hand and be able to talk about that in the informational interview or to ask questions about those specific tasks that maybe I didn't see getting done or that needed more attention.

