

## **Customized Employment Overview: Using Discovery to Guide the Path to Competitive Integrated Employment for People with Significant Disabilities**



### **Definition of Customized Employment**

Customized employment (CE) is a “package” of strategies that results in an individually negotiated position paying at least minimum wage or the same (commensurate) wage earned by other employees of the business without disabilities performing the same work. Customized employment meets the employment needs of the job seeker, while also satisfying an unmet need within the business. The individual with a disability is hired directly by the business and is an employee of the business. There are no group placements in CE, and people do not earn sub-minimum wages based on production standards. Since Texas adopts the federal minimum wage rate, which is currently \$7.25, any job negotiated using CE must pay at least \$7.25. However, if workers without disabilities are earning over the current minimum wage for the same work identified for the person with a disability, then the commensurate wage should be equal to the same amount.

### **Customized Employment Terms and Outcomes**

Here are some important concepts associated with CE:

- Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)
- Discovery
- Discovery Profile
- Vocational themes
- Individually negotiated job/position
- No group models
- Employee of the business
- No sub-minimum wages
- Minimum wage or comparable wages

### **Discovery NOT Assessment**

CE begins with Discovery to learn about the job seeker’s skills, preferences and desired employment outcomes. The result is a Discovery Profile that identifies the job seeker’s skills and preferences and is used to guide job development. During Discovery, the job seeker’s vocational themes are identified. Social networks of the job seeker are used to identify businesses that match the person’s vocational themes, such as family members, friends, and other people that the employment specialist knows. When negotiating a position, the employment specialist learns

about a business' needs through informational interviews and develops a job description with a business that did not exist before the job was negotiated.

Discovery does not include conducting assessments. So, why not use assessments? Assessments or evaluations typically take place in clinical or office settings where the functional skills of the person are not observed. This could result in reports about what a person cannot do leading to conclusions that they are not employable. In other words, assessments tend to exclude people with disabilities from employment opportunities rather than include them.

### **Discovery Activities are Individualized.**

The best place for Discovery to begin is in the home. The employment specialist begins Discovery by having a conversation with the person with a disability about their interests, talents, and needed supports. People who live in the same home can be engaged in these conversations as appropriate. The employment specialist may participate in activities with the job seeker (e.g., hobbies, daily routine, outings) to see what they enjoy doing.

Discovery also includes participating in activities with the job seeker (e.g., hobbies, daily routine, outings) to see what they enjoy doing. What is learned during conversations in the home can be confirmed during observations. The job seeker can be asked to identify places they typically spend their time. Preferably, these locations should be community-integrated settings where the person engages in activities. What is learned during conversations can be confirmed during observations. Assumptions about the person's skills should be avoided, and the employment specialist needs to keep an open mind about what can be learned during these observations.

An essential next step includes workplace observations that match the individual's interests. Discovery involves setting up experiences specific to the person's choices, interests, and skills that have been identified during initial conversations and observations. These experiences can provide new information regarding how the person learns, what supports may be needed in particular environments, and whether the interest can develop into a vocational theme.

In other words, all job seekers should not participate in the same activities. For instance, if an agency establishes a relationship with two or three businesses, all job seekers should not automatically go to these same businesses to observe or try out job experiences. The observations must be personalized.

Employment specialists are cautioned not to focus on only one interest or theme. Multiple observations across several areas of vocational interests is important during Discovery to ensure that the job seeker has choices and opportunities to explore several areas for employment.

### **Consider the following activities**

- Spend time with the person in his/her typical environment.
- Observe the person in the environment of his/her choice.
- Conduct informational interviews with employers.
- Assist the person in observing jobs of his/her choice or interest areas.
- Assist the person in brief work experiences to refine job preferences.
- Observe the person doing job-related tasks.

## **Job Shadow and Work Experience Opportunities**

Networking with past employers known to the employment specialist, friends, and family could help with developing job observations or job shadow opportunities. For example, other opportunities may be uncovered by researching where the family spends time. The point is that exploring the community and talking to people familiar with the job seeker is important to identifying job observation and job shadow opportunities. Cold calls, which are typically used in employment services, can take longer to establish opportunities than having “warm” contacts from familiar people.

There are no rules as to how long a job shadow experience should last. Spending a few hours where the job seeker can observe different job duties or participate alongside an employee of the business is preferred. These brief experiences allow the job seeker to learn first-hand the types of work that are associated with their vocational interests.

## **Discovery and the Labor Market**

- Customized Employment is not Labor Market Driven.
- The goal of Discovery is to get to know the individual to reveal vocational themes that can be used to guide the job seeker’s plans for employment.

You may be thinking that without a labor market, there would not be jobs for people with disabilities. That is true. But the point is to identify the business’s needs along with the individual’s interests, preferences, and support needs. This is the Discovery process, and it is an essential element of customized employment. So, instead of looking for jobs that are open in businesses and then seeing if you know someone who wants or “matches” the job, you begin by getting to know the person.

The goal of Discovery is to learn about the individual and identify vocational themes that can be used to guide the person’s plans for employment. Vocational themes are broad categories rather than specific jobs. For instance, vocational themes might be Art, Agriculture, Construction, and Health Care rather than actual jobs such as a nurse, waitress, or store clerk. Using broader themes expands the opportunities for exploring how the job seeker’s interests could be met in a type of business rather than a specific job.

## **Summary**

During Discovery it is important to build rapport and mindfully listen to the job seeker. Rapport develops as an employment specialist spends time learning about the job seeker’s employment goals. This begins with meeting at a location of the individual’s choice and develops over time while observing, interviewing, and engaging in other practices that lead to the identification of a customized job. Discovery is the foundation for job negotiation. Without Discovery, CE cannot be implemented without Discovery. Employment specialists are encouraged to learn more about their states’ guidelines for implementing Discovery when providing CE services.

The contents of this Discovery Information brief were developed under grant number H421D220004 from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. (Authority: 20 U.S.C. §§ 1221e-3 and 3474.)

