



Customized Employment Tactics: Increasing Employment Opportunities by Job Developing up the Supply Chain

By Cary Griffin

Customized Employment (CE) represents a new service strategy choice for American Job Centers (AJCs) and their vendors. CE represents an opportunity to better serve AJC customers with complex barriers to work. CE is an especially useful tool for Workforce agencies operating U.S. Department of Labor-funded Disability Employment Initiatives (DEI), showcasing innovative methods of employment development. Of particular importance to AJCs and their vendors is Customized Employment's departure from using traditional competitive employment strategies when approaching the labor market.

[Customized employment](#) is defined by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) as a means of individualizing the employment relationship between employees and employers in ways that meet the needs of both. It is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs and interests of the person with a disability, and is also designed to meet the specific needs of the employer. It may include employment developed through job carving, self-employment or entrepreneurial initiatives, or other job development or restructuring strategies that result in job responsibilities being customized and individually negotiated to fit the needs of individuals with disabilities. Customized employment assumes the provision of reasonable accommodations and supports necessary for the individual to perform the functions of a job that is individually negotiated and developed (Federal Register, June 26, 2002, Vol. 67. No. 123 pp 43154 - 43149).

Practitioners of CE recognize the job seeker as the locus of job development information, and not the labor market. In other words, the employment process takes into account the person's overall vocational desires, skills, interests and match to a worksite's culture and demands. An individualized vocational profile, derived from functional information about the person's work qualities, drives job development. For some systems, the CE approach is a departure from seeking job orders or searching for available openings; however, these more traditional approaches do not always work well for people with disabilities.

Today, many people with disabilities, who have little to no work history, find themselves directed to entry-level positions. This is how most of us start out in the working world. However, years of experience indicate that haphazard job matches lead to worker

dissatisfaction and high job loss rates. Addressing this issue by determining a proper career starting point reduces costs and increases customer (i.e., job seeker and employer) satisfaction. Often it is assumed that job seekers enter the world of work by taking whatever the market offers in the way of work. But CE is rooted in a different philosophy. CE recognizes that when matched to an environment where workers share similar interests, natural training and mentorship are more likely to occur. Bypassing rigorous human resources screening measures pervasive in larger companies, and approaching very small companies that operate less formally, often with the owner making the hiring decisions, creates opportunities for skill building and career advancement.

Looking back on our first jobs, we may recognize that employers hired us despite our lack of experience and skills, but saw in us a willingness to learn, to show up and to contribute. Though our life's work may not have been milking cows or waiting tables, our employers paid us while they trained us. Sometimes these entry-level jobs actually represented the start of our careers. Those of us interested in automotive pursuits may have sought out jobs at car washes, while those of us interested in education and children became camp counselors. There are unlimited ways to make a living and CE allows us to create opportunities in the weakest economies and even for those of us with under-developed skills or little work history.

Even at the entry-level, searching out a job that teaches functional or artisanal skills is as easy as searching out one that is routine or irrelevant. A stereotypical job for individuals with intellectual disabilities of transition age, for instance, is grocery bagger. This is noble work for those who desire such employment. But, grocery bagging is likely not the job of choice for most people. It is, instead, the job that is available largely due to its high turnover rate and the minimal amount of technical instruction required. But what if a young person with a significant disability did have an emerging vocational theme pointing towards food or agriculture? How might job developing up the supply chain work?

This graphic illustrates just one example of exploring strategic opportunities. Imagining for a moment again that the candidate is interested in food or agriculture. At the bagging or retail level, most of the skilled labor has already been invested in the product. Moving up the supply chain of the grocery store, however, opens up a host of other starting-point jobs, seemingly richer in the potential for learning skills and tasks that enhance one's career opportunities. Moving from bagging to the wholesaler level reveals opportunities for using industrial equipment (e.g. fork lifts, packaging machines), grading produce, learning health and safety regulations and processes, repairing equipment perhaps, meeting customers in the supply chain (e.g. food processors, growers) and assorted logistical and customer service experiences.

Further up the chain is the producer level. Here we find the artisanal cheese makers, the charcuterie specialists, the weavers, the farmer's market vendors, the bakers, the specialty cooks, the spice growers, and greenhouse operators. And beyond this, those providing the inputs – the farmers and ranchers. Supporting these businesses we find the veterinarians, heirloom seed processors, shepherds, breeders, biologists and botanists. In other words, in

all sectors of the supply chain, beyond retail, we find skilled work performed alongside entry-level tasks, and the potential to learn from these tradespeople who are also often self-employed business owners. Moving up the supply chain generates ideas, contacts and reveals employment options often hidden from the retail sector too often visited by job developers.

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Job Develop Up the Supply Chain

Goat Farm: Milking, care, cleanliness, health & safety, feeding, maintenance, breeding, farm tasks...



Related Careers: Growing grain, farming, weaving, butchering, cooking, veterinary, ranching, farm/ranch maintenance...



Cheese Making:
Cleanliness, chemistry, measuring, cooking, portioning, packing, B2B sales/service



Wholesaler Level: Pack boxes, value added processing, logistics, transport, customer Service...



There because of a Food/Agriculture Theme?

• The Individual is the source of Employment Information, Not the Labor Market



Retail: Opening boxes, bagging, chasing carts



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