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# **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: Using Customized Employment’s Discovery and Group Discovery Models to Promote Job Seeker Success in American Job Centers**

If you haven’t heard of Customized Employment, or you think it has little relevance to helping today’s job seekers in the nation’s American Job Centers (AJC), think again. Customized Employment offers an approach consistent with the most innovative and cutting edge human resource practices; Its signature strategy, Discovery, offers an approach for job seekers with barriers to employment that is consistent with some of the most widely accepted strategies for successful career development. Customized Employment and Discovery are not necessarily appropriate or desirable for all AJC job seekers with disabilities or other complex barriers to employment, but the strategies provide “non-traditional” options and choices – both for job seekers and AJC staff. If you want to know more about how American Job Centers can effectively implement Customized Employment and Discovery, take a moment to read these FAQs and learn more.

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**BACKGROUND**

**What is Customized Employment?**

Customized Employment (CE) was developed as a multi-strategy approach<sup>1</sup> to match the discrete skills and unique contributions of a job seeker with a significant disability to an employer who has an immediate need for those skills and contributions. The strategies of CE have been used with job seekers with disabilities and other significant barriers to employment, offering them the chance to work in areas of interest to them, in environments conducive to their individual needs for success, at or above the minimum wage, and with opportunities for advancement. CE includes strategies such as job carving, self-employment, job restructuring, and negotiated job descriptions crafted to highlight a job seeker’s contributions and meet the specific needs of an employer.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) published a definition of Customized Employment in the Federal Register (2002):

*Customized employment means 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...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)*

A definition of Customized Employment is now included in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and is defined as:

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<sup>1</sup> Strategies include Discovery, Job Search Planning, Job Development and Negotiation, and Post-Employment Support.



*“Competitive integrated employment, for an individual with a significant disability, that is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the individual with a significant disability; designed to meet the specific abilities of the individual with a significant disability and the business needs of the employer; and carried out through flexible strategies...” (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, H.R. 803, 113 Congress, 2009, p. 210)*

Between 2001 and 2006, a total of 26 CE demonstration project grants were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. This grant initiative aimed to increase the capacity of One-Stop Career Centers (now called American Job Centers or AJCs) to provide seamless, quality employment services for people with significant disabilities, a population often not considered “appropriate” for the generic workforce system.

The grants demonstrated that a specific set of strategies and funding sources could be knitted together and successfully implemented in the AJCs on behalf of individuals with significant disabilities; that people with significant disabilities want to and can work in integrated, competitive work environments; and job seekers with other significant barriers to employment (often identified in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs, Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG), Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Adult, Veterans Administration (VA) Chronic Homelessness, and Ex-Offender Reintegration Programs) are often also people with disabilities. Thus, when CE strategies are assimilated across population groups, job seekers with multiple and persistent life challenges can realize positive employment outcomes and employers can impact their bottom line by hiring workers for discrete job tasks the worker can do well and enjoy.

### **Is Customized Employment just for job seekers with disabilities?**

No. It is becoming increasingly clear that the concept of Customized Employment and the strategies associated with its implementation have universal benefits for a wide range of job seekers (with or without disabilities<sup>2 3</sup>) who are accessing the services of the nation’s American Job Centers. People who face multiple challenges to securing employment and others who are seeking employment that fits their unique lifestyle or other requirements will find Customized Employment, with a negotiated job description, to be an appropriate option. Customized Employment sounds both time- and resource-intensive. How does that fit in the current structure of the American Job Centers?

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dol.gov/odep/alliances/ce.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.worksupport.com/documents/cequest.pdf>



True, customized employment is a time- and resource-intensive strategy. However, considering the new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) legislation, with an increased emphasis on serving job seekers with disabilities (including those with significant disabilities), understanding Customized Employment and the strategies used to create employment success for job seekers with more significant disabilities can help career counselors recognize that people with complex barriers to employment most often can and want to work.

While the AJC will likely never be structured in such a way as to provide individualized assistance to every job seeker – and most job seekers, including those with disabilities, do not need CE – the CE assessment process, Discovery, is one that AJCs can adopt as an alternative assessment for career exploration to support not only job seekers with disabilities, but those with other barriers to employment.

## DISCOVERY

### **What is Discovery and how does it relate to Customized Employment?**

Discovery is the critical first step in the Customized Employment process; it guides job seekers through a process of finding out who they are, what they want to do, and what they have to offer. Think of Discovery as an alternate assessment; one that collects information about the job seeker's interests, skills, environmental preferences, employment goals, and other topics related to the job seeker's employment search, rather than outlining their deficits. It is a strength- based, individualized, qualitative assessment strategy that avoids some of the more comparative strategies that often exclude job seekers with significant disabilities and other barriers from generic workforce programs or the conventional job application process.

The process opens up possibilities for further exploration by the job seeker rather than just trying to “fit” into a fixed job description. Discovery is grounded in a belief that assisting job seekers to develop a full understanding of who they are is a critical step in successfully securing employment that is rewarding and sustainable because it creates a good fit for both the job seeker and the business that hires the job seeker.

### **Is Discovery a new term?**

Discovery, as a process related to job development, began in the mid-1980's and has been refined through a series of implementation projects for the past 28 years. As a strategy for people with disabilities, it evolved out of an early supported employment project at Syracuse University in conjunction with Marc Gold & Associates, and in the years since, has become a



generic term used for any qualitative strategy that seeks to understand who a job seeker is as a person and to translate those findings in order to enhance or create an employment relationship.

### **What is the outcome for Discovery?**

Discovery reframes the job search process from one that traditionally starts with labor market information to one that focuses on an individual's potential contributions to the labor market. The discovery process leads to the creation of a personal profile (sometimes referred to as a "Blueprint for Employment" or a "Positive Personal Profile") and a subsequent outline for employment or job development. Depending on the job seeker's employment goal stated in the personal profile, the employment goal could be a customized or negotiated job, self-employment, or an existing traditional wage job.

### **Can Discovery be implemented in an AJC?**

Discovery can be implemented in a variety of ways, but is always focused on an individualized approach. Depending on a job seeker's needs, Discovery could be offered as an independent guided journey, offered with some guidance, in a small group guided format, or in a one-on-one supported situation. Discovery workshops (See Group Discovery below) could be offered to job seekers by AJC training staff; facilitated by a trained community or faith-based organization provider; or purchased from a trained facilitator or vendor. Discovery as an alternative career assessment service is one that will position job seekers for success in their search for employment. Individuals with disabilities can benefit from the labor market information and career pathway strategies available from AJCs that maximize individual opportunities over the long-term.

For job seekers with disabilities eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services, most State VR agencies have a service structure that allows Discovery to be paid for as an individualized assessment. During Discovery, some job seekers will benefit from incorporating work experience, on the job training, and similar approaches, which provide insight into an individual's skills, talents, and interests – as well as how particular job tasks function or are performed within a typical work environment.

At the individual level, a Discovery facilitator will tend to provide the following services:

- Meet, plan with, and observe the job seeker over a period of time and in different locations/settings/environments;
- Interview family, friends, and other acquaintances;



- Synthesize observations about the job seeker at home and in the community; most importantly through a discussion with the job seeker;
- With the job seeker, identify his/her interests – and the businesses in the community that are most strongly aligned with these interests;
- Identify the contributions the job seeker has to offer to a business; and
- Identify the essential versus desirable conditions that will help the job seeker thrive in an employment situation.

Whereas the process of discovery is both an art and a science, it has been proven to help a job seeker gain a more complete picture of him/herself and prepare for employment. Following discovery, a plan for employment can be designed, which may or may not require the services of a job developer or job coach.

### **Are there different types of Discovery? And how long does each process take?**

There are a number of different types of Discovery. For the purpose of this FAQ, we will focus on Individualized (supported) Discovery and (facilitated) Group Discovery models, both of which require a job seeker committed to self-exploration.

Individualized (supported) Discovery is generally facilitated in a 1:1 format and is most appropriate for a job seeker for whom traditional career assessments are either not valid or useful, or for whom a traditional job with a traditional job description would not be a good fit. Because the approach is individualized, there is no prescriptive timeframe; the process could literally take anywhere from one week to six months (or more). Due to the labor market-focused approach of the American Job Centers, individualized Discovery would not be a widely used strategy. However, depending on State and Local Workforce Investment Board priorities, it certainly could be a service supported by WIA/WIOA comprehensive or short-term pre-vocational service funds; Medicaid or Ticket-to-Work dollars; or cost-shared with Vocational Rehabilitation (for dual-eligible/enrolled customers).

Group Discovery, which is covered in more detail in the next section, is a process that involves multiple sessions with a small group of job seekers and trained facilitators. Some Group Discovery models might meet once a week for four weeks (at two hours per session), while others will last longer or cover more depth in less time. The process is intended to be hands-on and requires facilitators who believe non-traditional assessments can have significant value, are able to think outside of the box, and are familiar with the AJC structure, partners and services.



## GROUP DISCOVERY

### **Can I help more job seekers at one time and offer Discovery in a group setting?**

Yes, Discovery can occur in a group setting. Group Discovery is a strategy that assembles small groups of up to 10 job seekers committed to an employment search. Led by a trained facilitator(s), job seekers are guided through a process of self-exploration and offered an opportunity for peer support, which is often beneficial to job seekers who may be struggling to find employment and may otherwise lose motivation to stick with the job search over time.

Similar to a more traditional job club model, Group Discovery provides the added benefit of networking and feeling less alone in the job search process. Built-in motivators are presented when outside resources are brought in to share information with the group, providing job seekers with an opportunity to make informed and educated decisions about what they need as they search for employment.

The use of peer support in American Job Centers is already recognized as an effective practice under WIA Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs; thus, Group Discovery is consistent with other practices already in use within American Job Centers. In addition, Richard Bolles, author of “What Color Is Your Parachute?,” strongly supports job-seeking support groups, noting an 84 percent success rate when job-search techniques are conducted in groups, compared with a 15 percent lower rate when the same techniques are offered individually.

### **What is the timeframe and time commitment required for Group Discovery?**

Group Discovery is a strategy for AJCs (or other community-based organizations) with limited staff time and large numbers of people seeking assistance. Group Discovery is designed around a number of required components that can be implemented in a timeframe that aligns with an AJC’s policies and practices. One model suggests meeting as a class once a week for four weeks (with each session lasting approximately one to two hours), though the timeframe can certainly be adjusted as necessary. Group Discovery offers a structured process and requires job seekers to complete independent research activities. The first session requires participants to identify a personal employment support network – and that network is to be used throughout the course.

Also, since most American Job Centers are struggling with limited staff capacity, Group Discovery offers an innovative way to provide services to multiple job seekers in one setting.



AJC staff can independently facilitate sessions or co-facilitate with workforce partners such as community- or faith-based organizations, TANF, Vocational Rehabilitation, JVSG, and more. As an alternative, an outside facilitator who understands the structure and partnerships within an AJC could be contracted to provide discovery services, and cost-sharing arrangements could become part of AJC workforce service partnership agreements.

### **Will Group Discovery provide benefit to both job seekers with and without disabilities?**

Yes. Discovery and Group Discovery are viable alternatives for individuals with significant challenges to employment, youth transitioning from school to work, or others who are seeking alternatives to their recent career path, whether or not they are identified as having a disability. Job seekers with disabilities are job seekers first, and are likely dealing with some of the same life challenges as any other unemployed or underemployed Americans.

The 2010 U.S. Census report indicated approximately 56.7 million people (or 18.7 percent of the 303.9 million in the civilian non-institutionalized population) had a disability<sup>4</sup>. Statistics reflecting disability percentages are generally thought to be lower than actual because people often choose not to disclose (for a variety of reasons), especially those with non-apparent disabilities. Therefore, it is quite likely that many job seekers currently accessing generic and population-specific workforce programs – such as TANF, JVSG, WIA-Adult, Unemployment Insurance, etc. – are indeed job seekers with disabilities.

Group Discovery is an innovative strategy designed to assist job seekers with barriers to employment learn more about:

- Their interests and skills – and how these relate to the labor market;
- The likely contributions they could make - and the businesses that would most value those contributions;
- The environmental preferences and unique conditions for employment that they desire – and whether each condition is essential or optional;
- The supports and accommodations they will likely need for success – not only for a job, but also for a career; and most importantly;
- How to turn a personal profile into a plan of action for employment.

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<sup>4</sup> Brault, Matthew W., "Americans With Disabilities: 2010," Current Population Reports, P70-131, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2012.



## **Where does Group Discovery fit within the American Job Center service structure?**

Group Discovery can be part of the current service structure (in core or intensive services), as part of career services or career pathways as defined under WIOA, and in accordance with the local area's provision of services. Discovery and Group Discovery are alternate forms of assessment and career development. It is a useful tool that potentially can benefit anyone with limited work experience or who faces significant barriers to employment and is in need of additional support to identify career goals.

## **What is the expected outcome from Group Discovery?**

After an effective Group Discovery course, a job seeker will have created a personal profile (sometimes called a "Blueprint for Employment" or a "Positive Personal Profile"). Part of the profile will include a job search (or job development) plan that could lead to a customized job, an existing wage job or self-employment, and can be used as a tool for the next step toward employment.

Since all employment is individualized, next steps will depend on the job seeker and his or her continued needs. Some will be able to use their own networks and find a job independently; others will need additional assistance from the workforce system or through its partners, as anyone else might after a career assessment. The bottom line outcome of Discovery or Group

Discovery is a more focused and determined job seeker...one who has a better idea of their skills, interests, what they have to offer an employer, and the supports and/or accommodations needed for continued employment success.

## **Which job seekers would benefit from Group Discovery?**

Group Discovery provides a small group, peer-to-peer opportunity for job seekers to accurately identify their interests, skills and contributions, and their essential/preferred conditions for employment. Whereas almost any job seeker could benefit from a Discovery-type of model, not all job seekers need or want to work in structured groups or spend the time Group Discovery takes before beginning a job search. Many job seekers, including customers with disabilities, can make use of other more self-directed forms of Discovery, and some may need an individual facilitated process (similar to the Discovery service that can often be purchased by Vocational Rehabilitation or another vendor).



Group Discovery would be most beneficial for job seekers who are committed to multiple sessions, interested in becoming an active participant in their job search, and meet one or more of the following characteristics:

- Enjoys working with others
- Is having a difficult time identifying his/her abilities and skills
- Has the ability to stay focused on one topic for at least 20 minutes at a time
- Has little to no employment history
- Can attain employment but has difficulty retaining employment
- Has specific conditions of employment that will need to be considered and addressed if employment is to be successful
- Has had unsuccessful experience(s) with the more conventional, demand-driven labor market approach
- Has one or more barriers to employment that has impeded a successful job search

## RESEARCH BASE FOR DISCOVERY

### **If Discovery grew out of the disability field, is there support for Discovery in mainstream career development and job seeking literature?**

The concepts behind Discovery are well supported in mainstream career development literature. In fact, Richard Bolles, author of the book, “What Color Is Your Parachute?,” provides extensive support for the superiority of a Discovery-based approach to career development over traditional vocational assessments, inventories and other evaluation-based tools.

According to Bolles, job seekers and career changers need to start their job hunt or career choice process by understanding more fully who they are. This includes beginning with homework on yourself such as: (1) discovering what you most love to do; (2) where you would most love to do it; and (3) how do you find such a job and persuade those employers to hire you. While he presents his own process, he contends the process is a critical “job hunting method....or one that has the heart and soul of a job hunting method, the one that has the best track record of any that are out there.” He argues that most job seekers don’t take enough time or a thorough enough look at who they are, and the result is often a limited sense of the kind of employment situation for which they are best suited. This limits opportunities and may also cause someone to take a job that ultimately isn’t a good long-term fit.



In a 2007 National Career Development Association Monograph Series publication<sup>5</sup>, Donald Schutt, Jr., Ph.D. describes Discovery as the first phase in a strength-based career development process. Schutt's Discovery phase is used to create a positive self-image, allowing individuals to envision even greater possibilities based on strengths. Career development professionals working with individuals or small groups, as described in the monograph, can use the process.

The need for Discovery-type approaches are also supported by corporate entities that want to get the most out of the 21st century workforce. According to a "Thought Leadership White Paper" published by IBM, today's workers "struggle to find the best way to go about attaining meaningful work and to determine what kind of organization best matches their personality."<sup>6</sup> They point to the importance of helping "the individual find and undertake meaningful and fulfilling work that is matched to their personality and style." They also talk about the end result of this new approach being that job seekers will "become more educated about career opportunities and their skills, become culturally aware and understand the type of culture they will thrive in, and define work through talent rather than jobs or roles." [Emphasis added.]

For job seekers who have traditionally struggled with finding the right job or even finding a job, Discovery is a strategy designed to help refocus, reframe, and redesign the job search approach. Why not have it grow roots in American Job Centers across the country?

### **What evidence exists that Customized Employment is an effective Human Resource (HR) strategy that businesses have embraced?**

While more traditional hiring and human resource strategies have long expected employees to put their company first and to adapt their lifestyles and aspirations to the company's culture and expectations, businesses are now recognizing that such an approach will not be effective with the 21st century workforce. A global survey of over 200 human resources executives worldwide found that the employer/employee relationship is changing fundamentally and, as a result, companies are rethinking the workplace to conform more to employees versus the other way around (Forbes, 2014)<sup>7</sup>.

Increasing diversity and inclusion in the workforce, long recognized as good for business by top performing companies, is bringing with it an increasing need for greater workplace flexibility.

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<sup>5</sup> Schutt, Jr., Donald A. (2007). A Strength-Based Approach to Career Development Using Appreciative Inquiry. National Career Development Association Monograph Series. Oklahoma: National Career Development Association.

<sup>6</sup> "Redesigning work creates a Smarter Workforce." IBM Software Thought Leader White Paper. July, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2014/01/24/new-study-redefines-workplace-diversity-it-no-longer-means-what-you-think/>



Businesses are recognizing that customization can be a human resource strategy that allows the company to survive and thrive and works for employees. Accenture human resources experts, Susan Cantrell and David Smith, call customization of employment a “game-changing approach to talent management.” In their book, “A Workforce of One” (Harvard Business Press, 2010), they highlight the benefits of Customized Employment through case studies of numerous top companies. They conclude, “When it comes to managing talent, one size no longer fits all. To be competitive as the economy regains its footing, and to maximize the performance of a workforce, companies need to understand and respond to the diverse needs of individual employees.”

Cantrell and Smith argue customization of employment is the essential strategy companies must use. They reported seeing “firsthand how customization fosters a workplace that is happier and more engaged, and how organizations achieve marketplace advantage through improved employee performance and productivity. Why? Because when jobs are customized to individuals... people’s work tasks become better aligned with their actual strengths.” [Emphasis added] This is the same compelling, common-sense logic that underpins the U.S. Department of Labor’s development of, and long-term investment in, Customized Employment as one essential strategy for effectively employing the highly diverse group of job seekers who seek assistance from American Job Centers.

As companies continue to try to capitalize on the growing diversity in our modern workforce, customization becomes a critical strategy to adopt. According to Cantrell and Smith, “Tapping a larger, more diverse employee base can breed innovation and help organizations more effectively serve a more diverse customer base.” They go on to say, “The great organizations of today and tomorrow capitalize on difference and they provide supporting structures to enable individuals to bring out their best at work.” Indeed, the IBM Corporation echoes these sentiments in presenting an approach to building a stronger workforce. According to a “Thought Leadership White Paper” published by IBM, “[I]f we can help employees understand their true talents, and in turn, help them find work that will use their full capabilities, the employee and the employer will both benefit.”

In “A Workforce of One,” the most critical reason for companies to engage in customizing employment is to improve how employees perform and, in turn, contribute to the business’s bottom line. Customized Employment can have the same positive impact on the performance of an employee with a disability and, if implemented at the point of hire, can ensure high quality performance and contribution virtually from day one of employment. The strategies associated with Customized Employment offers business one route to lower turnover and increase both productivity, as well as retention rates, all of which IBM says creates the fertile ground for



businesses to win by “getting its products to market faster, sharing collective knowledge and being more creative and innovative.” According to IBM, the companies that focus on these goals truly understand how employees impact the bottom line. They recognize, “It is not just good business. It is smart business...because what is good for people is good for business.”



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