



**LEAD CENTER**



## INFORMATION BRIEF

### Perspective of Employers on Customized Employment

This information brief provides the results of six focus groups conducted in 2015 under ODEP's Employment First State Leadership Mentoring Program (EFSLMP).

The purpose of the focus groups was to garner the perspective of employers of various sizes, sectors, and locations who had hired individuals with disabilities into customized jobs within the past year. Various questions were explored with the participating employers to determine:

**employment**<sup>1ST</sup>

- What factors are incentives for employers to customize jobs?
- What factors inhibit the customization of jobs?
- What are possible solutions to overcome factors that inhibit customization of jobs?
- How can community rehabilitation providers or other employment programs effectively market customized employment services to employers and human resource professionals?

#### WHAT IS CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT?

*Customized Employment\* is a flexible process designed to personalize the employment relationship between a job candidate and an employer in a way that meets the needs of both. It is based on an individualized match between the strengths, conditions, and interests of a job candidate and the identified business needs of an employer. Customized Employment utilizes an individualized approach to employment planning and job development — one person at a time... one employer at a time...*

\* The complete definition can be found at: <http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/CustomizedEmployment/what/>

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

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- ▶ **Employers who have tried Customized Employment embrace the approach as an effective practice with proven benefits and value.**
  - For large employers, the value is the embedding of job customization into the organizational culture with buy-in at all organizational levels.
  - For small employers, the value of Customized Employment is in being creative and utilizing flexible approaches that perform work that meets the unmet needs of an employer.
  - For both large and small employers, Customized Employment provides value in that it creates positions that perform tasks freeing up time for existing employees, thus allowing them to focus on core priority duties.
  
- ▶ **To employers, the terms *Customized Employment* and *Supported Employment* are interchangeable and largely irrelevant to them. Larger employers, in particular, would prefer to think of what they are doing as “job customization.”**
  
- ▶ **Customization can occur before or after the hire as employers learn about and better understand the capacity of the worker and identify other unmet needs that can be done by the worker.**
  
- ▶ **Several common themes were identified around the value of customizing jobs including:**
  - Removing tasks from existing staff, freeing them to focus on core elements of their job.
  - Fulfilling unmet needs of employers (work that was either not done or not done to a level needed by the employers).
  - Increasing efficiencies and economic benefit for the business.
  - Creating an inclusionary environment that improved morale and ‘team engagement.’ Team engagement was defined as understanding the mission of the organization, support for other employees, and working well with supervision.
  - Securing reliable and dependable employees that improve retention rates.
  - Receiving public acknowledgement, including but not limited to awards from government officials and positive input from customers.
  - Contributing to the community by employing individuals not traditionally thought of as employable.
  
- ▶ **Employers indicated several key factors for community rehabilitation providers to consider in effectively engaging employers and helping them to create customized positions in their businesses.**

- The quality of employment services, defined as:
  - *Knowing the business, including its products, services, and customers. Doing research beforehand and coming to the initial meeting with this information.*
  - *Understanding and addressing the needs of the business (versus the need of the provider to place an individual on the job).*
  - *Listening to the employer more than talking/selling to the employer.*
  - *Knowing the capacity of the job seeker and his/her potential value to the employer.*
  - *Being creative and flexible in how to meet the needs of the employer and effectively utilizing the skills and interests of employee.*
  - *Being passionate about the work of finding employment of individuals with disabilities.*
  - *Being responsive and available to the employer when needs/issues arise.*
- The commitment of the business to make Customized Employment successful as demonstrated by taking creative and flexible approaches to customizing jobs.
- The creation of ‘champions’ within the business that are fueled and further supported by passionate employment specialists/job coaches [Champions see the value of customization of jobs and internally promote and encourage the customization, which leads to a change in the culture of the business].
- The level of competency and ease by which providers and agencies can “make things easy” while avoiding the placement of additional administrative or documentation burdens on the employer.
- The removal or marginalization of any perceived risk in hiring an individual with significant disabilities by:
  - *Providing assistance to the employer at all stages of employment (hiring, performance appraisal, coaching, etc.);*
  - *Promptly removing candidates if the employee is not a good job match or when the job does not work out, and if possible, quickly providing other candidates to fill the position; and*
  - *Providing paid work experiences/on-the-job training/internships that allow employers to assess the skills and capabilities of the worker without making a commitment to hire.*
- Follow-up by the provider regarding the satisfaction of the employer with the employee and (if applicable) job coach.
- Assistance to the employer in identifying opportunities for additional customization of jobs.

 **Employers listed the following as factors that inhibit success in customizing jobs and offered solutions for addressing them:**

- Lack of experience of employer with working with people with disabilities.
 

**SOLUTIONS:** Create a risk-free opportunity; use job coach to work with staff to ease the transition for the employer, supervisors/managers, and the employee.

- Providers who are merely attempting to ‘place’ candidates versus meeting the employer’s needs.

**SOLUTION:** Demonstrate a focus on the needs of employers by providing quality services and supports to the employer.

- Union rules that can restrict hiring flexibility.

**SOLUTIONS:** Customize jobs that fill unmet needs and do not take away opportunities for union members. Create new employment opportunities for which candidates with disabilities are qualified.

- Small businesses generally are not aware of services of employment providers that would meet their needs including Customized Employment, and perceive provider marketing to be targeted toward larger employers.

**SOLUTIONS:** It was recommended that providers of Customized Employment share evidence that customizing jobs can work by providing experiences or obtaining references from other small employers who have had successful experiences. Develop marketing strategies specifically for small businesses that are evidence-based.

► **The employers commented on what should be key components of a marketing strategy (these components reflected the value they saw in Customized Employment).**

- Provide solutions for unmet needs of employers that impact their bottom line.
- Make it easy for employers to bring on individuals in customized positions (keeping documentation/reporting requirements to a minimum).
- Remove/marginalize risk for employer in hiring and subsequent personnel actions.
- Respond quickly to needs and issues of employers that arise.
- Assist the employer in creating an inclusive culture and workforce that demonstrates positive results in terms of morale and team engagement.

## KEY LEARNINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS RESULTING FROM THE FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

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These focus groups yielded information that has possible implications for entities that have a major stake in the success of Customized Employment. Focus groups, such as the ones conducted in this project, can inform policy, practice, and approach of other Customized Employment investments moving forward. Focus group findings can also help strengthen the communication between employers and community rehabilitation providers.

### For Employers

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- Increase understanding of the value and benefits of customizing jobs.
- Learn what to expect from employment services providers in terms of quality services and benefits of those services.
- Adopt customization as an integral part of the organization's culture and move away from the perception of Customized Employment as a program of services delivered by external providers.
- Create inclusive work environments that appeal to Millennials in the workforce who value working in diverse and inclusionary environments.

### For Funders/ Policymakers

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- Increase understanding of the potential value of Customized Employment in supporting individuals with the most significant impact of disability to achieve competitive, integrated employment outcomes.
- Evaluate funding, rates and reimbursement levels for providers of Customized Employment.
- Invest in the development of highly-qualified, well-trained job coaches and the need to ensure that salaries and training are commensurate with the required level of competencies.

### For Employment Service Providers and Agencies

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- Analyze current marketing approaches and develop strategies that reflect an increased understanding of factors that contribute to or inhibit successful customization of jobs.
- Focus on strategies that decrease (fade) the role of the job coach while meeting the needs of employers.
- Develop a focused attention to labor market trends and workforce needs in general to better forecast increased opportunities for customizing jobs.
- Build benchmarks that focus on organizational performance in employer engagement.
- Assess the current level of the organization's staff competencies needed for customized employer engagement and address the gaps through training, mentoring, and support.

- Adapt a focus group format to have ongoing conversations with the employer community to understand their needs and build relationships.
- Utilize employers who have had success in customizing jobs for referral to other employers and as reference.

## For Trainers

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- Better understand the competencies needed for job developers, employment specialists, and job coaches.
- Develop stronger curriculum for training programs around employment services that infuse effective Customized Employment strategies from the perspective of employers.
- Validate messaging, training curriculum, and technical resources with employers.
- Implement processes to maintaining regular contact with employers and understand the evolving needs of employers and trends in the workforce and marketplace.
- Stay current with the marketplace and in general trends in local high-growth industries specifically.

## FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE AND EMPLOYER SELECTION

A total of six focus groups were conducted across three different geographical locations: Seattle, Washington (June 3, 2015); Milwaukee, Wisconsin (June 29-30, 2015); and Atlanta, Georgia (July 7-9, 2015). Two national Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) affiliated with EFSLMP were assigned to each location to serve as moderator (facilitator) and note taker, capturing key points. The moderators were Nancy Brooks-Lane, Abby Cooper, Doug Crandell, Susan Harrell, Chip Kenney, and Dale Verstegen.\* For each focus group, a transcriber (court reporter) was present. The transcription service produced documents intended to be a verbatim transcription of each session. Facilitators explained the role of the transcriber, who was unobtrusive throughout the sessions.

Each of the six focus groups followed a specific protocol pre-approved by ODEP, which included an introduction, ten focus group questions, and concluding remarks. To promote clarity of language, each session began with the reading of the definition of Customized Employment. Employers were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the definition, as well as their views on other similar terms used in the realm of employment support strategies for individuals with disabilities.

Participant selection is a critical part of any focus group. The participants must be capable of providing feedback relevant to the objectives. It is also important to have a representative sample of participants across types and sizes of businesses. In order to be considered for participation in one of the focus groups, the employer had to meet the following criteria:

- Has customized a job for an individual with a disability that meets the ODEP definition of Customized Employment in the past year; and
- Played a major role in the hiring, approval to hire and/or customization of one or more jobs.

The employers were chosen so that:

- The range of the size of the businesses represented in the focus groups were from large national/multi-national employers to small businesses with less than 10 employees;
- The employer pool for the focus groups (i.e., 22 employers) represented a diversity in size of business and types of job that were customized; and
- Employers represented the private, public, and educational sectors.

To encourage an open dialogue and engagement, employers and the companies they represent were promised anonymity.

\* The list of focus group moderators, their titles, and organizational affiliations are as follows:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Nancy Brooks-Lane	Senior Consultant	Griffin-Hammis
Abby Cooper	Senior Consultant	Self-employed
Doug Crandell	Senior Consultant	Griffin-Hammis
Susan Harrell	Senior Program Manager	Washington Initiative for Supported Employment
Chip Kenney	Director	Southeast Technical Assistance and Continuing Education (TACE) Center
Dale Verstegen	Senior Research Associate	Transcen