



Self-Employment Technical Assistance, Resources and Training

Self-Employment Q & A: Discovery

October, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, determining employer needs and then finding a person with a disability to fill the job was common practice. Today, using a customized employment (CE) framework, an individual's talents and desires are considered first. Then suitable employment is negotiated that matches the person's skills, contributions, and interests. This customized approach to assisting an individual with a disability in finding

a job also applies to starting a business. In other words, the person's talents, desires, and interests are considered first, and the business idea follows. The process for determining the person's talents, desires, and interests is called "Discovery". This Q and A will answer some basic questions about how to use Discovery when assisting an individual in becoming self-employed.



How is the Discovery process implemented?



Discovery is an emerging technique. However, numerous practitioners are testing strategies in "real life" settings, and a basic framework exists. Please review the list of references that are provided at the end of this Q and A for additional information.

Discovery typically begins in the home with family members or others who reside there, and they are engaged in conversations with the individual. In these conversations, people are encouraged to talk about their observations of the individual's interests, talents, and needed support strategies. These discussions can also reveal the family's social capital, business expertise, connections, and experiences that may be helpful if the individual launches an enterprise. In addition to conversations, a quick look around the individual's household can provide clues to hobbies, interests, and chores that can be further explored in the community. A walk around the neighborhood can also provide information on local commerce, connections with neighbors, and the potential for leveraging social capital into employment connections.

An essential next step is to engage in community activities and sometimes work experiences that match the individual's interests. Several hours spent at a few activities, or in particular work environments, can give credibility to stated or observed interests. These experiences can provide new information regarding how the person learns, what supports may be needed in particular environments, and whether the interest has



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vocational potential. Essentially, the Discovery process seeks to get to know the individual to reveal personal themes that can be used to develop goals for self-employment. Questions that should be asked and answered include but are not limited to the following:

- ◆ When is this person at his or her best?
- ◆ What support strategies are needed in particular situations?
- ◆ How does the individual learn best?
- ◆ Who knows the individual well?
- ◆ What circumstances may make the individual anxious or frightened?
- ◆ When is the person “in flow” (i.e. at peak performance or most comfortable)?



Who should be included in Discovery, and what skills should they have?



Usually an individual’s service team initiates Discovery and enlists others that the individual identifies. A working team is best kept to a maximum of five or six people that are committed to supporting the person. Two of the key skills for those participating in the Discovery process are:

1. Listening with the ability to prompt conversation and remain respectfully quiet, and
2. Observing without speculation as to motives of the individual or others.



How does employment or business development proceed following Discovery?



The personal themes uncovered during the initial steps in Discovery lead to employment development strategies. One approach is to identify 20 specific places in the community where people with similar interests work. This has been referred to as “going where the career makes sense.” For instance, if three personal themes have been identified for a person, 60 places in the community where people with similar interests work should be selected. Next, five or six businesses are targeted where informational interviews can take place. The informational interviewing typically involves one team member and the individual. An entire team may overwhelm the employer.

The purpose of these informational interviews is not to apply for work. Rather, the meeting is for gathering information about the work performed and to get a tour into the backrooms and operations that job developers and the public rarely see. Through these tours and advice from employers, vocational opportunities emerge for the individual. Observations and discussions are focused to reveal emerging markets, holes in customer service, opportunities for job or small business creation, and so forth. As these, and possibly additional, informational interviews are completed, business ideas (or wage employment options) are developed. If owning a business becomes the vocational option of choice, then the team may be reformatted to create a Business Development Team (BDT) with staff and others skilled in enterprise development.



Do you have an example of how attitudes about an individual’s employment potential were changed through the Discovery process?



Yes, let’s look at a young woman who has been described as “depressed, unkempt, and unmotivated.” Her parents who speak primarily Spanish revealed that their daughter loves social activities of all kinds (e.g. parties, going to church, and bowling). In contrast, the staff members supporting her know her as a total “homebody.” They also felt that she is somewhat “slovenly and disheveled.”

After going into her bedroom (with permission), the team noticed that every dress that the young woman owns for special occasions (e.g. Easter services; weddings; family reunions in Mexico) was neatly arranged in her closet. They also learned during Discovery that she regularly cleans the house, which was spotless! The young woman also has an overwhelming interest in karaoke, evidenced by a karaoke machine in her bedroom!

During the conversations, the young woman openly stated that she really enjoys being in the company of children. Her mother quickly verified this information adding that the young woman’s older sister manages a day-care center down the road. Within an hour, someone who had received services for almost a decade was known as an entirely dif-

ferent person! The team realized that she is alive, vibrant, and talented compared to the previous hour when she was described as “depressed, unkempt, and unmotivated.”

The caution at this point is not to quickly identify a specific employment outcome. Often, professionals think in terms of job descriptions or small business types. In this example, some professionals might be tempted to assume that the young woman should go to work at the Day Care Center; become a housekeeper; or start a DJ service. Instead, these themes should be explored in the community, going to both familiar and unfamiliar settings, participating in activities and capturing information through observation.

For instance, a tour of a day care center to watch the young woman’s reactions and to see how she engages children is a next step. Or, a recreational outing or two such as karaoke might be conducted to assess her skills and support needs. The observations at this point should lead to the construction of a descriptive vocational narrative listing her family support, interests, observed skills, interests, and potential contributions to a business (i.e. she is tidy, organized, energetic, and friendly when she is doing what she enjoys), etc. Once a complete vocational profile is compiled, employment or business development can begin.



What role does vocational evaluation play in Discovery?



Discovery is vocational evaluation by other means. Traditional vocational assessments compare the individual to established “norms.” Comparisons are what CE aims to eliminate, because when people with disabilities are compared to others without disabilities, they are often scored as “less-able or less-worthy” of employment. Further, testing repeatedly results in a prescription of more training before the person is ready to work. Data collected over the past decades indicates that many people with significant disabilities will remain in “readiness” forever unless employment development commences.

CE assumes all people are ready to work, and Discovery shifts the focus from assessment to assistance. Again, because there are no limits to creativity in the marketplace; interest inventories and other paper and pencil approaches are too limiting. Exploration in the local community and matching the individual to environments where new skills can be acquired and old ones can be sharpened is a more effective approach. Time and money would be better spent assisting individuals in refining their business plans and operations, making certain that they are meeting customer needs and adapting to changing markets.



Is Discovery useful for everyone starting a business?



Knowing one’s strengths, interests, skills, and workplace contributions is important for all people wanting business success. But a Discovery process is probably not needed for individuals with strong work and educational histories who have ample supports, or who know their career path. In these cases, a thorough business feasibility regimen is likely more helpful.

Discovery makes sense for almost anyone with a significant disability and complex support needs. It also makes sense for individuals approaching a major life transition, such as exiting school. The goal of Discovery is to develop employment by answering some basic questions, including: Who is this person; where are they most who they are; what are the ideal conditions of employment? Discovery fits a proactive economic development model suggesting that armed with information about a particular individual, opportunities that match market needs and the person can be revealed or created.



Isn’t Discovery too expensive and time consuming?



Data suggests that Discovery must be formally designed using a project management approach or it loses its urgency and devolves into a substitute for day-program activities. Anecdotally, Discovery takes approximately 12 to 60 hours over a span of 4 to 6 weeks, with various team members being matched to the array of activities and experiences undertaken. Discovery should not be done by only one person because that does not allow for enough diversity of thought.

As for expense, Discovery appears to cost roughly the same as standard vocational evaluation. In states that set costs for assessment services, Discovery fits without too much need for cost increases. Several state Vocational Rehabilitation agencies now purchase Discovery, and Medicaid Waivers regularly cover assessment phases. Perhaps the cost of not doing Discovery, in dollars and time, should be considered. Traditional means of approaching assessment and employment yielded on-going day program costs and lifetimes spent unemployed.

We have an opportunity to start a paper shredding business with 5 people now served in the workshop. How does Discovery apply?

Discovery must be used to avoid this and similar circumstance. It is unlikely that in one program Discovery would yield data indicating that five people all want to earn a living in the same way. Rather, this seems to indicate that an opportunity to shred paper exists in the market, and the agency is seeking to fill it. Customized employment utilizes an abundance mindset that understands there are unlimited ways to make a living and by revealing who a person is and using creativity, businesses can be developed that meet each individual's employment goals.

Discovery is an individualized approach. Most major disability legislation, including the Rehabilitation Act, the Developmental Disabilities and the Mental Health Acts, the Workforce Investment Act, et al., reiterate that services should be individualized. Employment, therefore, should be individualized.

SUMMARY

The Discovery process is essentially the assessment phase that precedes determining an individual's career path. Discovery must begin with the belief that all people with disabilities can work and that they have multiple talents and interests. The process is both

open and formal; it is time-limited; and it is not concerned with predicting the future. Rather, it is focused on employment that matches who the individual is now. In a sense, Discovery creates urgency for engaging in meaningful work.

RESOURCE LINKS

- ◆ Callahan, M. & Condon, E. (2007). Discovery: The Foundation of Job Development. In C. Griffin, D. Hammis, & T. Geary. The job developer's handbook: Practical tactics for customized employment. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
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- ◆ Griffin, C.C., Hammis, D., Geary, T. & Sullivan, M. (2008). Customized employment: Where we are; where we're headed. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation. 28(3) 2008, 135-139.
- ◆ U.S. Dept. of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (2008). History, progress, transformation: Vision of the future. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Labor.

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