Customized Employment

Works Everywhere

Customized Employment: Works Everywhere

Customized Employment is an approach to hiring, retention, and return to work that ties the strengths, conditions, and interests of a job candidate or employee to the business needs of an employer. It provides greater employee satisfaction and productivity, among other benefits, bringing better retention and profitability for employers. It can bring people from diverse populations, including those with disabilities, into the workplace to contribute their untapped talents to businesses.

What Is Customized Employment?

Customized Employment is a flexible process designed to personalize the employment relationship between a job candidate or employee and an employer in a way that meets the needs of both. It is based on identifying the strengths, conditions, and interests of a job candidate or employee through a process of discovery. Customized Employment also identifies the business needs of an employer. Together, these create a match resulting in a customized position.

Customized Employment is helping both businesses and job seekers. It works in Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, and Washington, DC—all across the United States. Employers use Customized Employment to meet unmet needs, whether longstanding or newly identified. This unique approach works for everyone: single parents, mature workers, caregivers, and others. Leveraging their abilities to meet employers' needs is the basis of Customized Employment.

In addition, self-employment is a Customized Employment option that matches a job seeker's dreams and talents to economic activity while designing support strategies that promote success. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, small business ownership represents the largest market segment of new and expanding employment options in the United States, growing at an annual rate of 20 percent.

Customized Employment Works in New York

Many years ago, New York City school administrators told the parents of Andrew C. that his disabilities were so significant that he would never be able to work, even in a sheltered workshop. (Sheltered workshops are segregated, supportive work environments for people with disabilities; work typically is contracted with businesses, and many employees earn less than minimum wage.)

Instead, in 2009 Andrew marked his 17th year as an employee of Stony Brook University Medical Center. Customized Employment made all the difference. A Customized Employment specialist worked with Andrew and the hospital to create an internship position. This position enabled the hospital to have tasks completed by Andrew. It also allowed Andrew's "discovered" abilities to emerge. A good relationship between job tasks and skills was found. Andrew performed the job so well that when he graduated from high school, the hospital asked him to stay on as a permanent employee in a customized position.

Today, Andrew works 20 hours every week. His primary responsibility is to retrieve the foam rubber packaging material that protects medications delivered to multiple hospital departments.

"We've tried to customize Andrew's work to help us in the Patient Transport department as well as the rest of the hospital," says his manager, Robert Barravechia. "Andrew doing the foam run, and at times delivery of mail, frees up other staff to transport patients, who are the highest priority here at Stony Brook."

Andrew, now 38, has adapted to changing roles and responsibilities, especially as the hospital adopts new technology. Customized Employment continues to make that possible. Since Andrew started work, Stony Brook has expanded its use of Customized Employment and hired other people with disabilities.

Customized Employment Works in Mississippi

Andrew H. works on video editing equipment as a contractor for the Mississippi Power Company. The 18-year-old exemplifies Customized Employment success through a youth transition program.

The transition program helped Andrew discover his skills and interests and eventually find employment. With help from a job coach, Andrew identified video production as his calling and soon found work in Mississippi Power's media production department in Gulfport.

The department is small, intimate, and quiet—a good environment for Andrew. Because of the power company's customized position negotiated for Andrew, the company was able to refocus other employees on primary tasks. Even devoting just three hours a day, three days a week, Andrew learned his job tasks in less than two months. He edits videos, transfers video to DVDs, and organizes videos by date in the library. He also captures video footage into editing systems, burns and copies CDs and DVDs, creates labels, tapes videos on site, and dubs media.

As a full-time student, Andrew is engaged in a school-to-work program, working nine-hour weeks while attending high school. "Andrew has really come out of his shell," says his mother. "His maturity level has increased in the two years that he's been there."

A big benefit for the company is that the media department's employees are free to do their core tasks. "Andrew makes my job easier by handling tasks that I don't necessarily have the time for, and if someone doesn't get around to doing them, they add up," says Jon Carter, Andrew's manager. "He's part of the team."

Customized Employment Works in Missouri

Self-employment can be a Customized Employment option. A good example is Joe S., better known as "Poppin' Joe"—the emerging kettle corn king of Kansas City, MO. A supportive family and Customized Employment made it possible.

As Joe entered his teens, school officials held very low expectations for his employment success. They thought he probably would never work, or at best would end up in a sheltered workshop.

But Joe's success began in 2000 when he was only 15. Working with a Customized Employment expert, Joe discovered an interest in kettle corn. His family bought equipment and began popping kettle corn at Wal-Mart and grocery stores around Kansas City. In 2005, "Poppin' Joe's Kettle Korn" officially launched.

A typical work week for Joe is Monday–Thursday, five or six hours each day, preparing and delivering his product to retail stores. During festival and event seasons, Joe also sells kettle corn every weekend.

"'Poppin' Joe's is a very popular addition to our market. When he's not here, people ask for him," says Kate Maricle, Director of Events and Operations for the Overland Park Farmer's Market.

Business hasn't just popped—it's boomed. Sales grew from $16,000 the first year to $50,000 in 2008. Joe now employs five part-time employees. If business stays on track, it is expected to gross more than $100,000 annually in three years.

"I love being Poppin' Joe," says the 23-year-old, who also enjoys swimming and lifting weights at the YMCA. "I love being around people who know me and greet me. It connects me to my community."

Customized Employment Works in Maryland

Joan P. was unemployed for many years. Previously she had worked in sheltered workshops in California, as a dining room assistant and an office package and assembly assistant.

Joan, now 48, is not only employed but out of sheltered workshops through the Montgomery County (MD) Customized Employment Public Intern Project. She works for the county's Department of Liquor Control as a data entry assistant focused on quality control.

Joan's customized internship position requires her to compare scanned invoices to information in a database and make corrections as needed. The position is part-time—18 hours per week for the next two years—and there are indications it will be made permanent.

For Joan, a permanent job with the department would be a step up the socioeconomic ladder. At the sheltered workshops she received less than minimum wage, as allowed by the Fair Labor Standards Act. In her customized position, Joan earns $15.00 per hour, well above minimum wage.

"The job that Joan does is pretty important," says her manager, Jayson Abuan. "Liquor Control generates millions of invoices that need to be quality-checked to ensure the invoice number is correct. The work she does allows time for the information technology staff to pursue other tasks for the department."

Joan's success has encouraged the county to customize her position further, adding tasks to her job description. Boxes of invoices come to Liquor Control from all over the county. Joan empties the boxes and removes the staples from the invoices, makes sure all is in order, and organizes the invoices for scanning.

"I like doing prep work where I prepare the documents to be scanned, and I like doing data entry where I check invoices on a computer," says Joan.

Customized Employment Works in Washington, DC

Cathy G. is a permanent Federal employee with the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA), part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Cathy, 47, was unemployed and received Supplemental Security Income benefits before getting the position at BVA. Cathy wanted a flexible, part-time work schedule but had trouble finding employment.

Cathy was referred to MontgomeryWorks, a one-stop career center in Montgomery County, MD, where she worked with an intensive service counselor. After the discovery process and an informational interview in BVA's mailroom, she decided she preferred office work. Cathy and MontgomeryWorks determined she was a good candidate for Customized Employment.

BVA had a staffing need in its supply room and approached MontgomeryWorks for assistance. MontgomeryWorks and BVA staff discussed the need and Cathy's skills, and determined a Customized Employment strategy would work.

First, Cathy would work part-time rather than full-time. Second, she would be responsible for specific tasks under the original supply room job description. In the customized position, Cathy's job duties include restocking supplies, receiving shipments, noting supplies that need to be ordered, and preparing materials for eligibility hearings around the country.

Cathy works 20 hours per week and receives Federal employee benefits with a transportation stipend. "I have been here since 2007, and I love this job and the people I work with," she says.

Customized Employment Works in Louisiana

Jimmy C. clearly has proven his worth to the Sears store in Monroe, LA. Even amid staff cuts in a difficult economy, he has kept his customized position because he is too valuable to do without.

Years ago, Jimmy worked at a mobile home sales business setting up trailers. But that job didn't work well for him or his employer, as he required more one-on-one direction than managers were able to provide.

Jimmy went to a community supportive living center in 1987, where he got a place to live and other services. He also found a job working on a mobile janitorial crew. Jimmy soon said he wanted a job that did not involve cleaning, one where he could wear "nice clothes" to work. By using the customized process, he and the community center learned he was suited for the retail environment, as he gets along with a variety of people and enjoys regular contact with others.

Following his plan, a job developer began making calls to retail stores in the Monroe area. The community center was fortunate to have a relationship with a Sears general manager, and a call was made to explain customized positions and to present Jimmy's potential contributions.

At first the manager was skeptical, saying there were not likely to be unmet needs at his store. However, upon reflection and with additional discussion, the general manager assigned assistant managers to perform a needs analysis within the large store.

Their initial effort yielded few results, as the culture of the business reflected the view that everything that needed to be done was already being done. The general manager pressed for another analysis, this time advising his deputies that he would look himself if no needs were identified. That analysis uncovered numerous needs across a number of departments at the store.

The store manager requested a follow-up meeting with the community center's job developer. By matching Sears's needs with Jimmy's abilities, he saw the opportunity to customize a job description and offer Jimmy a job in multiple departments at the store.

That was nearly 20 years ago. Since then, Sears and the community center have worked together to continue to discover the unmet needs of employees, managers, and the overall store.

Jimmy initially worked about 18 hours per week. His job has been re-customized by Sears so he can continue to contribute as he ages and his needs change. "Jimmy is doing a good job at work," says the Sears operations manager, echoing Jimmy's coworkers.

Customized Employment: Works for Everyone

Customized Employment is working elsewhere, too: from Maine to Hawaii, Florida to Alaska. It's simple, sensible—and profitable. Employers have longstanding needs that must be met, or new needs may arise. Employees may need to transfer secondary tasks so they can focus on their primary jobs. At the same time, people with disabilities and others often overlooked in outreach and recruitment can provide genuine contribution to the workplace by performing many different tasks to help meet employer needs. Customized Employment works for everyone—employers, their current employees, and job candidates of all abilities.

Customized Employment is a process-driven concept with four essential components.

1. **Discovery:** Gathering information from the job seeker and the Customized Employment support team to determine the job seeker's interests, skills, and preferences related to potential employment that guide the development of a customized job.
2. **Job Search Planning:** Using the information learned about a job seeker in Discovery to develop a plan for meaningful employment, determine a list of potential employers, and conduct an analysis of benefits.
3. **Job Development and Negotiation:** Working collaboratively with the job seeker and the employer to negotiate a customized job; the provision of supports; and the terms of employment that will match the job seeker's interests, skills, conditions necessary for success, and specific contributions to fill the unmet needs of an employer.
4. **Post-Employment Support:** Setting up ongoing post-employment supports and monitoring the employment relationship to ensure satisfaction of both the employee and the employer.

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For more information about Customized Employment, see:

http://www.dol.gov/odep/CE-FWA

http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/custom/index.htm

1-866-633-7365

TTY: 1-877-889-5627

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