



**NATIONAL JOB DEVELOPMENT SURVEY RESULTS:  
TIME TO THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX STORE**

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**Working Draft**

**Introduction**

Supported Employment (SE) began its stall many years ago (Mank, 1994). While it remains the most effective means of assisting people with significant disabilities to get and retain jobs, Customized Employment (CE) techniques that enhance and bolster SE are critical to assuring that individuals with the most complex disabilities and support needs become successfully employed (Callahan, et al., in press; Griffin, et al., 2007; Luecking, 2009). Adopting new techniques often means one must quit using older, less effective tactics. Unfortunately, as we witness over and over in both small and large-scale systems change, adoption of the language of new technologies precedes actual implementation of these new strategies. In the case of Customized Employment, the language of “discovery,” “employer negotiation,” and “job creation” get regular acknowledgement these days, but the survey results reported herein illustrate that actual adoption and deployment of CE is still not widely observed. Currently, the language of the field does not match the practice, or as Texas slang insists, “you can put your boots in the oven, but that don’t make ‘em biscuits.” Perhaps by exposing this disconnect, we can speed adoption of CE’s foundational techniques.

This survey was not designed nor administered in a particularly scientific manner. It was however, introduced to various groups, teams, and training participants before the days’ work began, thereby minimizing the influence of the subject matter on people’s answers. The survey questions were displayed incrementally via a PowerPoint presentation to larger groups and verbally in several smaller team and individual meetings. In the larger groups, a showing of hands was recorded and constitutes most of the data represented. Those surveyed represent a broad spectrum of experience in delivering community employment services, meaning that the results are not particularly swayed by either new untrained staff or those well versed in CE techniques. The author alone is responsible for the interpretation.

A total of 187 community rehabilitation personnel were polled beginning in October 2010, with the last group being surveyed in October 2011. Thirty-three (33) individuals representing 17 states answered the survey questions during technical assistance calls, or during conversations at conferences and meetings. The remaining 154 participants were surveyed over the year at several national, statewide, regional, and organizational training

events focused on Customized Employment. Several of these daylong or multiple-day trainings were titled: “Linking Discovery and Job Development” or “Linking Discovery with Job Development for Individuals with Autism.” Audience members without professional job development responsibilities (i.e. consumers, family members, professional advocates) were not surveyed. A total of 187 respondents, with wide ranging professional experience and education levels, from roughly 36 states, are represented in this survey.

The questions asked in the survey derive from the basic tenants of CE. Fundamental to a customized approach is understanding that each individual is unique. In keeping with every major law regarding the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, including the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Workforce Investment Act, et al., CE, in practice, maintains coherence with the principle of individualization. However, practices in the field often do not. In CE, assessment (e.g., Discovery; Discovering Personal Genius) produces a vocational profile that details the individual’s skills, their related interests, their emerging vocational themes, the tasks they perform, their ideal ecological fit, their personal attributes, and supports needed to maintain employment (Griffin & Hammis, 2011).

In traditional job development, the review of labor market information and/or the search for job openings are standard procedures for vocational staff. However, these efforts are not particularly individualized. Within the CE framework, as in Supported Employment, we start with the individual, not the business. Perhaps the biggest disconnect is the continual prospecting by employment professionals for entry-level and stereotypical jobs in large retail chain stores and other corporate settings where heavily regulated and rigid Human Resources (HR) criteria competitively screen out applicants with significant disabilities. While achieving customized employment outcomes is certainly possible in large-scale companies, the crux of CE remains the circumvention of competitive and comparative systems of hiring that remain ubiquitous in corporate America.

*Note that this narrative should in no way be seen as a criticism of the hard work done by job developers, employment specialists, and job coaches across our country. Their work is inspiring and difficult. Instead, this survey is a mirror reflecting our systemic need to better train and equip our staff for the assigned tasks. Developing employment is a highly skilled occupation and it is time our recruitment, staff development, and pay reflected that reality. Let us all commit to developing a new generation of employment specialists that get the respect they richly deserve.*

## **The Survey Questions**

Each of the following questions was asked with the same preamble of “within the last year, have you:”

- 1. Reviewed Want Ads for Job Openings? Response: 91% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** The basis of CE is creating one-off jobs with folks for whom “off the shelf” jobs simply do not fit. So, looking for open-jobs is not recommended. A customized job, and frankly most good supported employment jobs, typically involves a determination through the Discovery process of the person’s skills and the tasks they perform, and most suitable work environments for the individual. Searching out businesses where these tasks, skills and personal attributes will contribute to the company, then analyzing the various tasks performed by current employees, and reconfiguring or amalgamating a selection of these tasks into a new custom job is how the process works. There should also be an economic development rationale of some degree at stake in the negotiation. That is, hiring the individual essentially represents a new efficiency that generates profits or reduces costs, thereby providing the wages to be paid. If an individual fits well in an existing job, there is no real need for a CE approach. For folks who do not fit well in open-job situations though, searching the want ads will not help. It is best to “go where the career makes sense” (Griffin, et al., 2007). That is, use the information from Discovery to profile companies where the contributions of the individual will be valued, then through a mutually beneficial negotiation, create a new job. Obviously, this will work best in a small company where there is little formality and where the manager or owner can connect with the employment seeker through shared interests, and/or a respect for the individual’s skills.

**2. Asked for an Application for Employment? Response: 81% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** Again, CE is meant to assist individuals who do not succeed in a comparative process. Asking for an application assumes the individual will be going through the same competitive process as other candidates, even if they have the additional help of an Employment Specialist or Job Coach. CE circumvents the process and instead uses a variety of means to discuss an individual’s talents and fitment within the company. Warming up job development using informational interviewing, leveraging connections through personal, professional, and organizational social and economic capital, and targeted networking are more effective methods than applying for jobs. Again, seeking out smaller companies is a better strategy. There are approximately 37 million businesses in the U.S with only 17,000 having more than 500 employees. Yes, these big companies hire millions of people, but getting in is a rigorous ordeal, compared to the 36,983,000 smaller companies, many without complicated hiring procedures, labor-attorney certified job descriptions, or massive firewalls between management and employees. The odds are with the smaller companies, even though it may take getting to know the community to find many of them, since they may not have lighted signs or be located on the box-store strip west of town.

**3. Taken or sent someone on an Interview with an HR representative?  
Response: 77% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** As above, using a comparative approach does not work well for individuals with the most significant disabilities. HR’s job is generally to screen people out. Smaller companies again offer the best opportunity for a face-to-face with the decision-maker and the person who will most appreciate the potential of someone. This is because, if done

correctly, the individual job seeker is compelled to approach a particular enterprise based on shared interests and the presumption of contribution. Human relationships are based on shared interests, and people who share similar interests generally teach or mentor one another. This augments the use of natural supports and potentially reduces job coaching stigma and costs. HR professionals are perfectly lovely people, but often they inhibit human connections between potential employees and company owners, managers, or coworkers. Another way to think about this is that a preponderance of small businesses are artisanal in nature; they make a product or sell a service. When matching someone to a particular company and set of negotiated tasks, one who can contribute to the efficient production of that product or service, and one who is interested in that product or service, even if they have a very limited or even no experience, is more likely to be hired than someone who makes no personal connection with an individual representing a company's hiring process. The negotiated job offers the opportunity for human interaction and often buys enough time for the disability to become less overwhelming to the employer, allowing the skills and human connection to mature just a bit. In a sanitary HR process, these connections seldom occur.

**4. Sought jobs at major retailers, common box stores, and/or grocery chains?**

**Response: 89% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** As above, these large corporate entities have elaborate HR processes that inhibit the employment and advancement of individuals with significant disabilities. Of course, many of these companies have diversity initiatives that do hire people with disabilities, often in open-jobs, and sometimes in what might be considered group settings (e.g. a warehousing situation where the majority of workers have disabilities, or an enterprise where work experiences are specifically set-aside for transition-age youth). These may represent good opportunities, but they are not customized. One important consideration should also be that the job being secured holds the potential of advancement within the company, or in a new job in another company derived from the useful skills learned doing the first job. In other words, does the job promise some concrete tools or opportunities for career advancement? Opening boxes in the storeroom of a major retailer seldom leads to another better position; bagging groceries in a super market chain rarely results in becoming a produce buyer or Information Technology specialist in the back office. Now, there is nothing wrong with opening boxes or bagging groceries, these are respectable jobs. But we must ask if customizing work that leads to advancement is really that much more difficult. What we find is that it is more complex, it's a bit more time intensive, but the results, and the retention are such that, anecdotally anyway, a CE approach is worth the investment.

**5. Asked an employer if they are hiring? Response: 82% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** Employers are always hiring. They are hiring people who match their needs and the company culture, and who generate profits. Wages are the residue of profits and without this economic imperative job creation is often quite difficult. Beyond this, asking an employer if they are hiring will almost certainly result in the easiest answer in the English language, "no." In a negotiation, where does one go after "no?" Asking this

question is a non-starter. It's like proposing marriage on the first date. In job development, the employer, especially in a very small firm, first has to know the prospective employee cares about the company and the work. Then the relationship generally needs a bit of time to simmer and mature. A better strategy is to refine the job seeker's vocational themes, list out all the companies accessible to the person that potentially perform tasks of relevance to the individual and that represent work environments or conditions that match the individual's profile, and then begin the employment exploration (Griffin, et al, 2007).

**6. Sought jobs at stores that are strictly retail? Response: 75% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** Many retail companies have high or predictable turnover, so they are somewhat easy targets for job development. Also, anyone can walk through the big sliding doors without being screened out by a security guard or receptionist. These stores certainly can offer good jobs for people, and make wonderful work experience sites, when the tasks and environment match the individual. However, many retail jobs have been stripped of complexity and mobility, offering wages for routine work such as opening or sealing boxes, putting garments on hangers, facing cans in a grocery store, or dusting shelves. It is true that all of these jobs involve the development of skills, but they seldom lead to career advance, the development of specialized skills of value to other employers or internal departments, and these jobs have been secured so often that they are as stereotypical as someone doing paper shredding or feeding the kittens at the local Humane Society. We have reached a point in our system that we simply have to say "no more" to these jobs, unless there is compelling evidence through Discovery that these jobs match the individual. There are unlimited ways to make a living in the world, so why is it that so many people with significant disabilities have to roll silverware at restaurants, clean toilets at fast food franchises, and bag groceries at the local Mega Mart? If we are to become creative in the least, we need the courage to stop taking these placements that reinforce stereotypes and that maintain our dissociative relationship with our local communities.

In almost any town there are far more companies doing business than a team of job developers will ever have time to visit. It is difficult to understand how, in cities the size of say Seattle or Albuquerque, job developers note that companies complain about being approached by too many job developers. Instead, exploring back roads, the alleys, garages, and basements identified through leveraged social capital, a new world of opportunity is revealed. Just say no to that next routine janitorial job, and instead, if an individual's skills and interest lie in that direction, reframe the theme as *cleanliness* instead of thinking within the job description of cleaning. Cleanliness is vital to heart surgeons and custom hot rod painters; it's essential to chemical research technicians and four-star chefs. That one little change, dismissing the job description and thinking more broadly, instantly opens new options. Instead of focusing on someone's love of puppies, (and after all, how unique is that?), explore careers related to animals. Someone who loves puppies might work at (oh no!) the Humane Society or a pet super store next to another box store, or at a kennel. But, when we explore "animals" in Discovery, the emergent theme may lead us to taxidermy, or farming, or a veterinary hospital, or to a

national park, or to an environmental organization, or a hunting outfitter, where there are a multitude of tasks to be done and skills to be learned related to animals. Often, people tell us they want to work in particular fields because it is all they have been exposed to. The CE process allows us to investigate the broader world of commerce, where there are countless jobs and opportunities, far beyond cleaning up after others (not that there's anything wrong with that...it's just been done too many times before).

**7. Looked specifically for jobs with repetitive tasks? Response: 77% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** We have lost a generation of employment personnel who know how to teach complex tasks to individuals with significant disabilities. Systematic Instruction is a vital skill needed to assist new workers in rapidly learning their job duties and growing skills (Callahan & Garner, 1997). But also, people tend to job develop up to their ability to teach. If an Employment Specialist cannot imagine how to teach someone to rough-frame a doorway in a new house, they are likely not to approach a construction company to develop such a job. And while it is not necessary that a job coach know how to do all the tasks in the world, it is imperative that they have the skills to logically deconstruct tasks and offer useful advice to coworkers or others in a worksite that will assist an employee with a disability. By searching out routine work we significantly inhibit creativity, the use of technology, and the advancement of careers, independence, competence, and earnings. We also send the message of incompetence to employers.

For example, in a recent training activity the author accompanied a group of employment personnel and family members of individuals with autism labels to a local metal fabricator to demonstrate the use of informational interviewing in job development. We spent about an hour talking about the business with a company representative, and observed workers using welders, grinders, doing design work, operating plasma cutters, etc. No one in the group had experience in this particular field, though all were impressed and attentive. When we entered a storeroom full of inventory, one person asked the manager, "Who cleans up in here?" It was an innocent question, but it instantly suggested to the employer, especially in the absence of similar questions regarding design, welding, and plasma cutting, that the individuals we serve are good at cleaning and that's about it. Why that question and not a question about welding? I can assume, perhaps unjustly, that this individual could not imagine teaching the individual they had in mind how to weld. Our limitations, and our system's failure to equip front line staff with essential knowledge undermines choice and the prosperity of those we serve.

**8. Looked specifically for cleaning/custodial jobs because an individual "enjoys" cleaning? Response: 63% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** As noted above, custodial work is noble and necessary. However, it has become the default job for folks with significant disabilities. Our approach to Discovery requires the identification of at least three overarching vocational themes by combining tasks the individual does, skills they have, and their interests. These themes are not job descriptions. They themselves are reference categories that contain countless jobs

(Griffin & Hammis, 2011). Reframe a real interest (which must include some skill level, though perhaps very minor or under-developed) in cleaning, determined through the essential activities of Discovery, as “cleanliness” and explore the countless jobs that offer related tasks in appropriate environments. Try mixing two of the themes to see what new ideas and locations emerge. For instance, people with the themes of Entertainment and Mathematics will be found handling finances in theaters, talent agencies and promotions, nightclubs and bars, in the business offices of a circus or a cable television station, in a car stereo shop or a home entertainment design studio, at a luthier company, and at a public aquarium. Really, is there any business on earth that doesn’t value math skills? Determine the entertainment side of the equation and match to the ecological profile of the individual, and the negotiation is half done.

**9. Approached a company in your agency’s supply chain for job development purposes? Response: 11% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** The economic impact of rehabilitation agencies, special education units, and people with disabilities on a community is profound. All spend sizeable amounts of money for gasoline, food, housing, banking services, medical care, etc. And yet, few agencies leverage this power by making certain their supply chains practice reciprocity by hiring people matched to the tasks needing to be done in their businesses. Of course, most job development staff cannot affect this organizational policy without risking their livelihood. The gentle leveraging of economic capital is best done by leaders and administrators. Simply asking vendors to provide informational interviews, work experiences, and introductions to companies in their own supply and customer chains provides countless opportunities for enriched job development. If your vendors refuse, don’t argue; find new vendors.

**10. Approached a company in your personal supply chain for job development purposes? Response: 31% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** Much as above, having personal connections is vital to successful job creation. Start with people who already “owe you” on some level. Reciprocity is an important business and human expectation. Working with someone who matches up to the garage that repairs your car? Ask for advice from the mechanic; ask for recommendations of who else might be contacted; ask about folks in his supply chain who might have tasks reflecting those of interest to the employment seeker. The hard sell is not required; people want to help you, but you have to ask them. And, no one needs to give permission to ask naïve questions of businesses you patronize. “Hey, thanks for fixing my car. By the way, I am working with a guy who is really into cars. He doesn’t have any experience yet, but he’s eager. What advice would you give to someone wanting to learn the trade and get their first job working with cars?” Simple as that, and almost guaranteed to get a positive response since you are writing a check as you speak.

**11. Had a Board of Directors member assist in getting someone a job? Response: 6% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** Again, this is not a task one unilaterally takes on. Permission must be granted from the CEO. After years of facilitating Board retreats, doing Board training, crafting strategic plans, this author knows that many Board members are bored stiff and feel underutilized just reviewing monthly financial reports. Many Board members joined the agency's governance team to have an impact on the lives of people with disabilities, but the reality is that most members seldom get meaningful interaction. Deputizing Board members to leverage their social, economic, and professional capital is a commonsense means of discovering potential employment. Board members are often movers and shakers in the local economy and can get employment staff and job seekers into unique places. School Board members are often even more influential and well placed in their communities, but how often are they asked to assist a transition-age student with their first job? Make their roles meaningful. Customized employment is a team sport.

**12. Had your agency CEO/Executive Director assist in getting someone a job?**

**Response: 19% affirmative.**

**Discussion:** CEO's are people too. They got into the field because they believe people with disabilities deserve quality lives. Sometimes the crush of budgets, emerging state policies, personnel issues, fund raising, and Board meetings restrain active involvement in daily program and consumer affairs. But CEOs are well connected. They are meeting with bankers, attorneys, elected officials, bureaucrats, and other community leaders regularly. They have influence and can warm up job development efforts with a few phone calls or a drink at happy hour. It may also be advisable for the Executive Director to occasionally carry a caseload of one. That is, select one individual and serve on or head up their team through the CE process. This is a terrific systems improvement tactic; it shows the leader the bottlenecks in their system and often illustrates just how much an agency and its related allies can do to advocate for employment. CEO's can often leverage funding that front line staff only dream of. A creative job development example from an Executive Director leaves a sizeable impression on staff, consumers, and families. Lead from the front.

**Recommendations & Conclusion**

1. **Professionalize the role of Employment Specialists.** Certify individuals, not agencies, using the various training programs available across the country being encouraged by the APSE/The Network of Employment and certified by the Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE), TACE Centers, on-line training entities, various university programs, and others. Such an effort gives Employment Specialists status and bargaining power, which will increase their pay and their importance to an agency. This also provides minimum expectations for quality and consistent employment services for employment seekers; funders such as state VR, DD, Special Education, and Mental Health agencies; families; and employers. Creating employment is a difficult task; it demands a cadre of well-trained and well-paid professionals with competencies in worksite instruction, job analysis, job creation, negotiation, and functional assessment.

2. **Engage families and job seekers in employment development.** The first iteration of this survey included questions about seriously, not symbolically, leveraging family/consumer social and economic capital, and turning over power and money to them for the effort. The discussion that followed this concept muddled the results and raised so many critical issues that the questions were dropped from the survey. Turning over more than symbolic power to consumers and families was far out of the control and experience of those surveyed. This topic deserves on-going conversation and policy revision. Many organizations have experience in this area and turning over control to consumers and families should be an obvious direction for the system. A number of demonstration projects are currently underway showcasing the importance of community members, families, and consumer control (Discovery, after all is anchored by the consumer and family members), but more emphasis on returning power and responsibility to individuals is needed by the system. The next question showcases a bit of the issue with turning over power and control to consumers. On some level, the underutilization of PASS probably stems from the system's need to remain in control, as do the half-serious efforts at what passes for social entrepreneurship.
3. **The Social Security Administration should immediately inform anyone receiving an SSI and/or SSDI check that they may be eligible for a Plan for Achieving Support (PASS)** and assist him or her in scheduling a free work incentives analysis. PASS use is staggeringly and inexcusably low at less than one percent of beneficiary utilization. Nationally there are 2,700,000 concurrent beneficiaries, those receiving both SSI and SSDI, who have the "perfect" math for a PASS (statistically about 30% of all people served in community rehabilitation programs are concurrent beneficiaries). Conservatively estimating an average PASS at \$7,000 per year for 2 years means that almost \$38 *billions* dollars is available for individuals nationally to direct their own employment, and who could be purchasing these services locally. As a system, we have an ethical duty to inform consumers and their families of the money we are leaving on the table. With the reduction of cash benefits resulting from increased employment, SSA could afford to fund PASS writers and managers across the country.
4. **Stop using standardized assessment and vocational evaluation** to determine the "employability" of people with the most significant disabilities. CE is a non-comparative, non-competitive strategy and employment development should reflect the assumption that all people have contributions to make in the marketplace. Redirect the savings into support: assistance, not assessment.
5. **Embrace self-employment and microenterprise** as a reasonable alternative to wage employment. Reframe the folklore of the mythical "entrepreneur" to the creation of one-job-for-one-person, with a profit motive.
6. **Stop funding "social enterprises"** that simply repackage and camouflage paternalistic agency-owned congregate programs, again violating the individualization principles specific to all major disability legislation.
7. **Quit spending money training people for jobs that do not exist.** People with significant disabilities can often get training money through the Labor Department's One-Stop system, but they seldom get job development, job

coaching, or business start-up funds. Training does not create jobs; jobs create the need for training.

8. **Remove the archaic staff to consumer ratios** from funding formulas, especially in day programs. Allow one-to-one staff/consumer time for Discovery. Yes, a floor supervisor may be responsible for 9 people instead of 5 a day or two a week, but with absenteeism, daily meetings, staff shortages, etc., these ratio criteria are rarely met anyway. Use day program time to access the community and get real-time data on skills, tasks, and interests while the individual awaits referral to formal employment services.
9. **Individualize job development funding** instead of assigning a standard number of hours for all referrals. In many circumstances, job seekers moving from day programs to community employment are assigned “6 weeks of job development” or “8 weeks of job development.” This artificial allotment is not individualized; it does not recognize the importance of skillfully crafting employment options. Many people finding themselves in these situations are poised to spend the next 30 years in day program at an estimated average cost of somewhere around \$400,000, not including ancillary services or cash benefits and Medicaid. Allotting a six-week window is not a customized approach. Achieving employment success is not an event it’s a process.

Traditional models of employment development, based in labor market theory, emerging career sectors, readiness training, vocational testing, and heavy on Human Resources processes are artifacts of a previous century. Customized Employment is not necessary for everyone, but for those who suffer the brutality of competitive and comparative systems, be they vocational assessments that norm-reference scores, or behavioral standards that reflect only the values of some idealized polite society, or job interviews that pit one applicant against another, the means of identifying a personal profile and crafting opportunities holds great promise. The crux of CE again is individualization.

At a recent conference on autism, I heard frustrated professionals and parents alike reiterate that their child or “their consumer” was “unique,” “one of a kind,” “unlike anyone else.” And then they asked about the availability of congregate programs that would make people successful. One of these programs, heralded throughout the conference, was showcased during the opening keynote. This program, run by a large American corporation, was replacing migrant farm workers (largely from Mexico) with crews of young adults with autism. The corporate manager exclaimed that the traditional workers carried cell phones to talk with friends working for other farms and when they learned that a competing producer raised pay five cents a basket, the crews would leave for the higher paying farm. She noted that the folks with autism do not typically carry phones and they are more “loyal,” so people with disabilities were recruited as replacements. It was noted more than once that “people with autism really enjoy working outdoors.”

Was there an immediate negative crowd reaction? After all, here was a large corporate entity pitting poor people against other poor people, and manufacturing stereotypes about people with autism. No. Instead, a wave of applause filled the auditorium. So many

families, people with disabilities, and rehabilitation professionals are discouraged and caught up in scarcity thinking that they accept lowest-common-denominator solutions, even if they contain a tinge of racism, a bit of stereotyping, and a healthy amount of exploitation.

Packaged vocational programs are generally not individualized, but they seem to offer some hope that comes from uniformity and predictability. Many work programs start with the industry actually and not the individual at all, taking a big part of the scary job development process out of the daily routine and thereby garnering great favor with those frightened of the business community. But what they offer in terms of work experience or employment is usually countered with a paucity of individualization, reliance on continued taxpayer support, and only a modicum of career advancement. Hopefully, CE will remain unencumbered from readiness criteria, behavioral expectations, and the sameness that comes from standardization.

CE's strength is that it uses refined processes with flexible boundaries, capable of accepting most people while maintaining the crucial promise of individualization, and capitalizing on the abundant nature of commerce and the never-ending tasks required to make economies function. We are lucky in that we have committed leaders, policy makers, and front-line staff who work tirelessly to assist people as they connect with their local communities. We have much work to do, but we know more now about creating successful outcomes than ever before. We need skilled, well-paid, and highly valued employment staff to make customized employment fulfill its promise.

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