

# Supported Employment/Customized Employment Matrix

## The distinction between demand employment and a customized relationship

*A White Paper by Michael Callahan  
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For decades, funding systems and agencies serving persons with disabilities held a target of *independent performance* as an expected outcome for persons wishing to participate in community life and in employment. Doubtless, many thousands of individuals wishing to become full participants in the fabric of their communities were excluded due to their inability to achieve that independent status. In the mid-1980s the concepts of supported employment and supported living opened the doors to many of those excluded individuals by removing the arbitrary barrier of independent performance by recognizing that few persons with or without disabilities actually achieved that status. By offering support at the point of need, many more individuals could participate in community life and employment alongside their peers without disabilities.

For those working with persons who historically have been the least likely to become employed – persons with developmental and multiple disabilities -- supported employment offered the promise to provide a remedy through the provision of ongoing job-site supports. It was hoped that by getting around the barrier of independence, that all who wanted to work could now be employed. And, indeed, tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands of individuals with significant disabilities, were successful at becoming competitively employed using supported employment.

In 1986 Congress added supported employment to the Rehab Act of 1973 as “*competitive work in integrated settings... for individuals with severe handicaps for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred.*” This addition provided the critically important funding stream for supported employment in federal legislation. Theoretically, at least, a significant barrier to employment should have been removed. But as years went by, it became clear that the competitive standard was becoming a problem, even with the provision of job site supports. The term *competitive* used here does not refer to “integrated, community employment” as many practitioners have implied. Rather, competitive refers to the true competition that job seekers face regarding both the demands of the job, as defined by employers, and the efforts of other job seekers vying for the job.

In work performed by United Cerebral Palsy Associations during the 1990s, it was found that even with effective job matching and strong job site supports many job seekers with the most significant disabilities – those with intellectual, physical and multiple impact regarding work performance – were not able to achieve “competitive” standards. And these were the same individuals who were also performing poorly on the comparative evaluations and assessments that had continued, in spite of the changes in the 1992 Amendments to the Rehab Act that no longer required individuals to prove their feasibility to benefit. However, it was found that if employer expectations and competitive job descriptions could be re-structured, that virtually all individuals could make beneficial contributions to workplaces for which employers were willing to offer pay at or above the minimum wage.

During the 1990's these efforts at job restructuring and “job carving” were carried out across the disability employment field in local, disconnected efforts aimed at extending access to employment by removing the competitive standard. The numbers of individuals assisted were relatively small (probably less than 5,000) and rarely counted as a unique group within supported employment outcome figures. Testimony was offered to the Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities, a task force empanelled late in the second Clinton Administration regarding the importance of bringing this issue to a more recognized status.

In 2001, the newly formed Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) within the US Department of Labor coined the term *customized employment (CE)* to represent these job restructuring strategies and to initiate a major effort to promote these practices as a part of both disability employment services as well as an aspect of the generic workforce system. The ODEP conceptualization of CE was connected to both the strategies of supported employment and to the typical, competitive approaches designed to meet existing needs of employers in the workforce system. But as CE has evolved, it has also diverged from the job restructuring and carving techniques of the 1990s that had as a focus the competitive job description of the demand economy.

Instead of carving or restructuring an existing job description, CE focuses on discrete unmet needs of businesses and specific productivity areas that employers feel would benefit their companies. Rather than removing duties and leaving employers with a sense of loss related to their demand, customized strategies are formative, meeting actual workplace needs, thus providing a built in incentive for employers. Thus, CE provides the strategies necessary to remove one of the last conceptual barriers to employment for *all* persons with disabilities who wish to work – the competitive standard.

Like its kindred concept independence, competitiveness is deeply embedded in both the human psyche and in our market economy. Neither of these concepts is wrong-headed. But both hit at the very essence of the impact of disability on life. When people with or without disabilities can reach independence and competitiveness, we should celebrate that achievement and applaud the strategies that allow for them to occur. However, when independence and competitiveness are barriers, we must find ways to get around them and acknowledge the importance of the strategies that allow for success. This paper is written to explain the connection between the two great ideas that have allowed us to get around the barriers of independence and competition – supported employment and customized employment.

### ***Examining the interaction between supported employment and customized employment***

In an effort to look at the intersection of SE and CE, it is necessary to get at the essential, defining characteristics of the concepts. The defining aspects of SE that are used here are the competitive standard and job site supports. The defining aspects of CE are the negotiated relationship and the fact that ongoing supports may or might not be necessary for success. The following matrix accounts for the manner in which job seekers with disabilities might need various services in order to become successfully employed. A set of functional definitions is provided below.

*Competitive Employment* is defined as demand employment from employers in the form of pre-existing job descriptions referenced by job titles for which job seekers compete with others to obtain and for which employees must meet the demands of the job descriptions. This definition also includes market-driven self-employment.

*Customized Employment* is defined as a set of pre-employment activities that result in a negotiated relationship between employers and job seekers that focuses on discrete workplace needs and specific productivity not defined by an existing job title. This category also includes customized, self-employment.

*Supported Employment* is defined as a set of pre and post-employment activities and supports that provide job seekers the additional support necessary to successfully perform the responsibilities of a competitive job.

*Natural Supports and Reasonable Accommodations* refer to both the existing supports on job sites typically available to all employees as well as the legal protections and benefits available to all workers with disabilities.

	<b>Competitive/Demand Employment</b>	<b>Customized Employment/ Self-Employment</b>
<b>Natural Supports and Reasonable Accommodation only</b>	<i>I. There are job seekers who will not need either SE or CE to become employed and to stay employed</i>	<i>II. There are job seekers who will need CE to become employed but will not need SE to stay employed</i>
<b>Supported Employment and Natural Supports</b>	<i>III. There are job seekers who will not need CE to become employed but who will need SE to stay employed</i>	<i>IV. There are job seekers who will need both CE to become employed and SE to stay employed</i>

**Implications for Vocational Rehabilitation:** VR is likely to see job seekers in all four areas of the matrix. Traditionally, VR has focused on those who are able to become competitively employed without the on-going supports offered by supported employment. In the mid-1980's Congress added competitive supported employment to the VR act and this group became an additional focus for employment services. In 2001 the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the US Department of Labor (DOL) began an initiative to add customized employment relationships to the mix. The implications for VR are significant. For job seekers who might not be able to successfully compete for an open job, CE offers a customized relationship based on discrete employer needs rather than job openings. Some individuals who were felt to need on-going supported might only need CE, thus representing a savings to the various funding systems. CE also offers an opportunity for VR to focus on those individuals with the most significant impact of disability, typically served by developmental disability funding sources, job seekers who often need both a customized employment relationship and on-going supported employment.

VR will need to adapt to changes required by the CE process, however, to take advantage of the benefits of CE.

- Most VR agencies continue to fund a version of competitive assessment as a pre-condition of providing supported employment funding. Since CE is a contribution-based strategy rather than a competitive one, VR will need to pay for exploratory approaches like Discovery instead of assessment. While the costs for each should be similar, it will not make sense to pay for both.
- Customized Planning creates another challenge for VR. The IPE, required for all who access VR services, focuses on a demand job title of such specificity that it can be referenced in the Directory of Occupational Titles. CE uses a more open plan that references the range of employment interests that job seekers have and then attempts to negotiate a specific description that does not exist at the time of the plan. This issue is often resolvable by using a "work-around" in the VR system but the difference has to be acknowledged.
- Job development strategies must follow the customized plan, not simply reflect the single job goal of the individual. Provider agencies must embrace the willingness to

follow a customized plan and adopt employer interaction strategies to accomplish the plan.

- Finally, for self-employment, VR has set the competitive standard high regarding expected wages and has been reluctant to provide capitalization for businesses considered to be “hobby” or “personal interest” focused. CE brings the aspects of the amount of money that is necessary for success as well as the potential business owner’s interests into the design of the business.

**Implications for Supported Employment Funders and Providers:** Traditionally, supported employment has occurred in Section III of the Matrix with employees receiving job supports that have allowed for a successful competitive relationship with employers. However, it has been recognized for over twenty years that additional, pre-employment strategies would be necessary for SE to be successful for persons with the most significant and multiple impact of disability. Until the advent of CE, those strategies were primarily organized under job restructuring and carving efforts aimed at a demand job description. CE has articulated a new focus for these traditional strategies that is formative, addressing discrete unmet needs of the workplace and offering specific productivity in ways that meet employer needs outside of typical demand. By embracing Section IV of the Matrix, supported employment funders and providers can extend the reach of traditional SE to encompass the purposeful negotiation of the employment relationship, along with the job supports that are also necessary. In this way a hybrid concept, Customized, Supported Employment emerges to provide access to virtually all who want to work.

There will be challenges, however, regarding the pre-employment process called for by CE. Many SE provider agencies continue to provide comparative, competitive assessment for the VR funding system and they continue to respond to open jobs with demand-focused job development. Significant strategy changes will have to occur to follow a process that assures customization as an outcome. As with VR, supported employment funders and providers have rarely embraced the development of self-employment as an outcome. Customized self-employment provides a better fit to the individual and encourages both business ownership and a “day job” for those with a personal interest in starting a business to augment their life style and income.

**Implications for the Workforce System:** For the workforce system, its typical user would be traditionally served in Section I of the Matrix. Most users of the generic workforce system do not use either customized employment to become employed or supported employment to remain employed. However, the entire matrix could prove useful to the generic system, especially as demands for universal access increase in the future. Just as regular schools have been expected to offer full inclusion to students with disabilities; it is becoming increasingly clear that the workforce system will be expected to offer employment services to adults with disabilities. Many of these job seekers are currently receiving their employment services from categorical providers and funders who target individuals with disabilities. As they seek services from generic sources, the workforce system will need to have the skills to respond. Section II of the Matrix represents an ideal place for the workforce system to start. Many of the current users of the one-stop system who are chronically unsuccessful in landing a competitive job could benefit from a customized relationship. By adopting customized procedures for this group, the workforce system would not only receive direct benefit to its current users, it would also learn the skill sets necessary to meet the needs of many job seekers with disabilities. And furthermore, the generic system and VR could collaborate on behalf of job seekers who might need additional supports to remain successful employed.

There are challenges to the generic workforce system in embracing CE. The current system is based on meeting the demands of local employers. The one-stop centers act as a way to recruit, assess, prepare and funnel job ready applicants to potential employers. Employers set

the play by defining their needs through the jobs they have available. CE will assist the one-stop system by allowing a new way to focus on those job seekers who remain unemployed, but interested, month after month and even year after year. But CE requires the focus to start with the job seeker by implementing a discovery process that is fundamentally different than the assessment and interest inventory strategies typically used. And job seekers will either need to be represented to local employer or be taught to self-represent for customized jobs.

**Implications for Employers and Job Seekers:** Employers have traditionally assured that needs are met by carefully analyzing their businesses in relation to the positions that are open at any given time. The positions are described by a job title and a job description that captures the employer's required responsibilities. The system works well for employers and most job seekers, especially for those with experience and credentials. From an employer perspective, CE offers an opportunity for employers to move beyond the presumption that full employment results in a condition that everything that is supposed to be done in the workplace is actually getting done. Many employers either simply assume that details are actually getting done or feel that, in the absence of complaints, the important things must be getting done. CE engages employers in a negotiation that offers the opportunity for a *needs analysis* that can reveal unmet needs that have been overlooked or ignored. This analysis can also focus on specific areas in which productivity might be augmented. In either case, the prospective job seeker provides the benchmark, the starting point for negotiations and the needs analysis. This releases the job seeker for whom competition is a barrier from competing with others. This niche benefit has been found to be of such importance to employers that wages of minimum to prevailing standards are routinely offered to new employees. Employers may also choose to examine their workplaces relating to unmet needs and areas of specific production and to offer the opportunity for job seekers to make a proposal to meet some or all of those needs and to obtain a customized job description with the employer.

Job seekers have just as much to gain as employers. CE offers a process that has as its central intention to discover the job seekers' interests regarding employment, necessary conditions for success and specific contributions and to follow the path created by that discovery to potential employers in the community. CE provides a way around the barrier of competition and it assures that the resulting job, to the greatest degree possible, fits the individual. Too many job seekers with disabilities have been "placed" into jobs that either were not a match for their skills or their interests – "Get a job, any job." – sort of approach. Too many other job seekers and individuals who never had the chance to identify themselves as job seekers have been excluded from employment due to the competitive standard. CE provides the way around all of that.

## ***Customized Employment Definition and Indicators***

According to the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) of the US Department of Labor Customized Employment is defined as, *“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 and negotiation between the strengths, conditions, and interests of a job candidate and the specific 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.”*

### **Customized Employment:**

- Seeks to negotiate the essential responsibilities of a job, as defined by an employer and/or the non-essential expectations of a job for purposes of customizing a unique job description for the job seeker.
- Occurs in integrated, community workplaces or in self-owned businesses.
- Involves pay at or above the minimum wage.
- Results in an employment relationship between the individual and a community employer -- one person, one job – without an intermediary holding the employment relationship.
- Provides access to ongoing employment supports, as needed.
- Results in a living wage with benefits, as defined by the individual, including continued access to governmental benefits.
- Is driven primarily by an exploratory process such as discovery as opposed to a competitive, comparative, assessment or evaluation.
- Is developed through the use of a process that allows the job seeker to define the direction to the job market.
- Involves the use of a variety of negotiation, job restructuring and other flex strategies that allow job seekers to access employment beyond the job openings available in the demand system.