

The federal government has prioritized improving employment outcomes for individuals with the most extensive support needs. Specifically, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) contains specific measures to promote competitive integrated employment outcomes for these individuals. One of these measures expanded the scope of supported employment to include customized employment (CE; Riesen et al., 2023). Over the last two decades, CE has evolved as a compelling job development technique for a diverse range of people with extensive support needs (Salon et al., 2019). Given legal and regulatory initiatives advocating more integrated job opportunities for individuals with extensive support needs, it is becoming increasingly necessary for educators to be aware of empirically supported strategies such as CE that result in integrated employment.

What is Customized Employment?

WIOA (2014) defines CE as

competitive integrated employment, for an individual with a significant disability, that is based on an individualized determination of the strengths, needs, and interests of the individual with a significant disability, and is designed to meet the specific abilities of the individual with a significant disability and the business needs of the employer... carried out through flexible strategies (29 U.S.C §705(7), p. 1634).

Examples of flexible strategies for implementing CE include working with employers to customize job descriptions; adapting job duties, schedules, and job locations; altering the supervision process; and providing services and supports on the job (WIOA, 2014). Additionally, there are four primary process components to CE—discovery, job search planning, job development and negotiation, and post-employment support (see Table 1).

Table 1

Components and Descriptions of CE

CE Components/Description
<p>Discovery</p> <p>Conduct interviews and observations to identify the individual's interests, strengths, abilities, and support needs for obtaining and maintaining CE.</p>
<p>Job search planning</p> <p>Information learned through the discovery process is used to develop a plan, identify a list of potential employers, followed by an analysis of the benefits.</p>
<p>Job development and negotiation</p> <p>The individual and employer negotiate a customized job, types of supports the individual will need, and the terms of employment.</p>
<p>Post-employment support</p> <p>On-going post-employment support is established through monitoring the employment relationship to confirm both the individual and the employer are satisfied.</p>

Note: Table based on Kim et al. (2023) and Harvey et al. (2013).

What the Research Says

Riesen et al. (2015) evaluated the CE literature and found 15 non-databased and 10 databased articles on CE published between 2006 and 2013. The authors noted that databased CE articles were descriptive in nature (i.e., non-experimental). Nevertheless, positive results related to CE were similar across the studies examined. These studies revealed that individuals with disabilities who received CE had an improved quality of life, income greater than the minimum wage, accomplishment of part-time or full-time employment, and stability in wage earnings and hours worked for up to 2-year period. Similarly, Riesen et al. (2023) conducted a follow-up review of the CE literature published between 2015 and 2021. Although the literature continues to be primarily descriptive, findings remain the same—CE yields positive employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Inge and colleagues (2023) recently investigated the efficacy of CE with transition age students with intellectual and development disability. Results indicated that participants who received CE services had more positive competitive integrated employment outcomes than participants who did not receive CE services. These outcomes included part-time work earning at least minimum wage in jobs of choice, with a much greater participation rate than the group that did not receive CE services. In addition to improving competitive integrated employment outcomes, the authors also found evidence to suggest that CE may boost independence in three specific domains—home living, employment, and protection and advocacy. Results from this study expand our understanding of the effectiveness of CE as a pathway to competitive integrated employment.

Guidelines for Practice

CE is a promising practice that has been linked to improved competitive integrated employment results for individuals with extensive support needs (Riesen et al., 2015; Riesen et al., 2023). Educators can promote the use of CE by sharing information with families about both the components and the effectiveness of CE. In addition, educators can help families learn more about CE services by providing them with a list of local CE providers.

To maximize the potential success of CE, it is important for students to receive a variety of work-based learning experiences prior to graduation from high school. Providing direct, hands-on work-based learning experiences may allow individuals with disabilities to develop not only job skills but also the “soft skills” that are essential in competitive integrated employment (Müller & VanGilder, 2014; Wehman et al., 2016). Participating in job experiences prior to graduating from high school has a dual benefit. In addition to gaining job skills, students also develop relationships with businesses, and employers have an opportunity to get to know the students. It may also aide in reducing preconceptions and fears around hiring individuals with disabilities (Wehman et al., 2018).

Additional Resources

Customized Employment Competencies

<https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/pdf/2011cecm.pdf>

Customized Employment: Stories and Lessons Learned from the Field

https://www.griffinhammis.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Updated_CE_Stories_optREV4withPW.pdf

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