

Discovery: The First Phase of Customized Employment

Customized employment is a strategy for supporting individuals with significant disabilities to obtain competitive integrated employment. It involves identifying and placing individuals with disabilities in jobs that match their strengths, needs, and interests and meet the needs of the business (WIOA, 2014). Customized employment consists of four phases: (a) discovery, (b) job search planning, (c) job development and negotiation, and (d) post-employment support. This research brief will focus on discovery, which is the first phase of the process.

What is Discovery?

Discovery aims to understand job seekers' interests, learning styles, support systems, work environment, and current skill level. It is considered the *foundation of customized employment* because it allows the employment specialist to familiarize themselves with the job seeker through personal interactions and observations (Inge et al., 2018). Furthermore, it employs a person-centered approach that focuses on the job seeker's abilities rather than their limitations (Inge et al., 2018).

Discovery begins with home visits, observing the individual engaging in life activities, and conducting informational interviews with the job seeker, family members, and other stakeholders such as local employers. This process helps fill gaps in understanding the job seeker's abilities and allows collaboration with people who are familiar with the job seeker's abilities, goals, and support needs (Riesen et al., 2019).

What the Research Says

There are many practices that guide employment specialists during the discovery process. Jones et al. (2020) explored vocational rehabilitation counselors' views of the discovery process and identified collaboration as a key activity. Vocational rehabilitation counselors described collaboration as a continuous state of

networking, connecting with local businesses, and understanding employment trends. Collaboration also involves building relationships, engaging family members in discovery, and identifying community partnerships. Similarly, Riesen et al. (2019) asked experts in the field of customized employment to rank the most important principles of discovery. Important principles included visiting the job seeker in their home or place of choice, observing the job seeker completing more than three familiar activities to assess their skill level, and gathering information about the job seeker's daily life. Using these principles, employment specialists gain information about local resources, such as transportation and businesses, and insights into the job seeker's support system. Experts also emphasized the importance of employment specialists and job seekers conducting informational interviews with employers related to the job seeker's skills, interests, and abilities. This process helps identify local businesses to target for the job development plan and informs future discovery activities.

Guidelines for Practice

Transition professionals often use a variety of strategies to learn about a student's work interests, skills, support needs, and goals. These strategies are essential to conducting meaningful transition assessments that inform the transition plan. Using the principles of discovery, transition professionals can extend their repertoire of strategies for gathering information beyond typical transition assessments. This information may be most useful in helping students obtain paid work prior to graduation, but it may also aid in narrowing the focus of work experiences while the student is enrolled in school. Below are guidelines for using discovery.

- Build rapport with the job seeker to understand their needs and find the best job placement options.

- Hold back assumptions and use observations to truly understand the job seeker.
- Visit the home environment to learn about resources available to the job seeker and to obtain information about family supports.
- Observe the job seeker during daily activities and work-related tasks in various community settings to learn about their skills, interests, and abilities.
- Set up informational interviews with employers to understand jobs available in the community and assess if the job seeker's skills and interests align with the business' needs.

Additional Resources

National Disability Institute

<https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/employment/discovery-and-customized-employment/>

This website offers resources to facilitate two approaches to discovery: self-guided discovery and guided group discovery.

Discovering ME!

<https://centerontransition.org/projects/discoveringme.cfm>

Discovering ME! is a transition planning process for developing early work-based learning experiences for students with significant disabilities.

References

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This research brief was developed by the Illinois Center for Transition and Work at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign through a contract with the Illinois State Board of Education. Information presented may not reflect the position or policy of the Illinois State Board of Education.

