



Customised Employment



Introduction

The introduction of the Commonwealth Disability Services Act (DSA) in 1986 is seen as a significant event, when open and supported employment options for people with disability were clearly distinguished.^{1,2} Although this legislation has been in place for over 30 years, a significant number of people with disability, particularly those with intellectual disability remain out of the open workforce. During this time, there has been multiple government enquiries and reports written, along with studies undertaken by academics all over the globe regarding employment for people with disability.

Despite these ongoing efforts, the current research indicates the year 12 completion rate for students with disability is 41.8% compared to 61.8 for students without disability. According to Emerson et al (2018) since 2001, the percentage of working aged Australians with post-secondary qualifications has increased for both those with and without disability. The rate of increase has been greater for those without disability, consequently the gap between the two groups has widen between 2001-2016.^{3,4}

Likewise, only 54.4% of working aged people with disability are in the labour market, compared to 83.2%⁵ of people without disability. These outcomes are not consistent with the intentions of the DSA, nor the multitude of other public policy initiatives, particularly the National Disability Strategy (NDS) and of course the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Both Commonwealth and state governments aim to promote the social and economic inclusion of people with disability, and employment is a key indicator of their inclusion. Yet employment of people with disability has not improved and has reduced for those with significant disability and those transitioning from school to work.⁶

Young Australians with disability have similar career aspirations to other young people yet are more than twice as likely not to be employed or satisfied with their employment opportunities and job prospects.⁷

Introduction to Ticket to Work

Ticket to Work is a nation-wide initiative. It uses networks of key stakeholders to coordinate and support school to work transitions for students with disability. According to independent evaluations of Ticket to Work, network members feel they achieve better outcomes for young people with disability, when working in collaboration with other services than they can independently.⁸ Customised Employment (CE) is one approach the many Ticket to Work networks use to facilitate students with disability into employment.

Customised Employment

Having originated in the United States and Canada, Customised Employment is an approach tailored to the unique abilities and interests of the job seeker, and the specific needs of an employer.

Using Customised Employment techniques many young people with disability can successfully transition from school and obtain sustainable employment in the open market.

According to Griffin, Hammis & Geary (2007) the process of CE starts with three fundamental principles

1. Every person is employable in an open employment environment.
2. Persons with disabilities, particularly complex disabilities are disadvantaged by traditional competitive employment methodology.
3. It's all about the person/s.⁹

From these three principles, there are 4 broad components or aspects of Customised Employment which are described in a variety of ways, with some more prescriptive than others. For example, EconSys/IFC International (2011)¹⁰ Customized Employment Competency Model, has 4 step and 31 components and tasks.

Significant research is occurring currently to further identify the critical components of Customised Employment, and to develop ways of measuring whether services are providing these components in a manner that will ensure successful outcomes. The components are as follows:

1. Knowing the Job Seeker and Exploring Employment Possibilities

Work customization starts with knowing and understanding a person and his or her “ideal conditions of employment”. Discovery, as it is sometimes referred to, is getting to know the person first, before looking for employment.

Discovery involves obtaining information about the person’s interests, strengths, environments or activities where they are at their best, and identifying effective supports for them. Getting to know the person also involves understanding the person’s “unique contributions” and then later matching these to a relevant employer and job.

In this context, a person’s potential contributions involve his or her:

- Skills (present and potential)
- Personality traits
- Interests and preferences
- Previous experiences
- Other strengths or ‘valued attributes’

It takes considerable time and investigation to ascertain a person's strengths, interests, preferences and needs, along with any potential barriers to implementing a customised work opportunity for the job seeker. This "Person Centred" career development can be a useful way of getting to know people well within their communities and supporting them to guide the career development process. School, family, community members and employment consultants develop the plan together using a collaborative approach.

The following is a link to an example of [Discovery](#).

2. Developing a Customised Employment Plan

The next step is to develop a plan for obtaining customised work opportunities. The job seeker needs to direct the development of his or her plan. This documented plan becomes the "blueprint" for the job seeker's employment search.

The following is a link to an example of a [customised employment plan](#).

3. Identifying and Negotiating Employment Opportunities

These initial two steps focus on the needs of the potential employee with only minimal consideration of the specific needs of the employer. Disregarding the employer's need for labour to contribute to the productivity of their business is unlikely to produce sustainable employment. Consequently, the third step of customised employment is to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the employer's needs. Again, this step takes time and research, networking and getting to know the nature of the business, and the tasks undertaken by the employees. This step may involve meeting with prospective employers, interviewing them about how their business and staff are managed and conducting site visits to understand business needs.

The next step is to match the needs of potential employers with those of potential employees. A job seeker with strengths in performing certain tasks or in learning how to do so can be matched with an employer needing staff to perform those tasks.

For example: Emma has multiple impairments; she is non-verbal and is unable to read, making her the perfect candidate for shredding confidential financial information. Watch this short video: [Master Shredder](#)

At times potential employees may be able to fit into existing roles, although this is not the essential nature of Customised Employment. Instead, an employer may have staff undertaking a wide range of tasks, some of which match the skills and interests of the potential employee with the disability. Negotiation then will occur to explore the feasibility of the potential employee undertaking the specific tasks matching his or her skills and interests free up the time of other staff to undertake other tasks.

4. Supporting the Employment Opportunity

Once the customised employment option is identified, there is a need to provide ongoing support to specifically meet the needs of the employer and the employee. These may include

the following steps.

- Assisting with identifying and developing any job accommodations. This may have occurred in the previous broad steps but as the employee begins working other needs may be identified which need accommodation. Rather than a one off event, this is an ongoing need for both employers and employees.
- Assistance with on the job training. Generally, this is a role for employers, but they may benefit from the expertise of others with knowledge of strategies that will make the training more successful.
- Monitoring the ongoing employment relationship.

School to Work Transition and Customised Employment

Certo and Luecking (2006) describe a model of supporting the transition of students with significant disabilities using CE strategies.¹¹ The model calls for the blending of resources to support students obtain employment prior to leaving school and maintaining that employment through ongoing support. Ticket to Work is based upon this model. These authors contend pairing a service integration model, which uses a blend of resources like Ticket to Work, with CE strategies will improve outcomes.

In 2018, the School to Work pilot funded by the NDIA in Western Australia gave approximately 500 students in year 10 and above access to 150 hours of support focused on achieving open employment. The pilot was based on the belief that all students who wish to work can do so if given the appropriate support using a Customised Employment (CE) approach.

National Disability Services delivered training on Customised Employment to key stakeholders, including disability organisations, NDIS planners, Department of Education and other school staff, parents and people with disability. Seventeen NDIS providers in the pilot are embedding the CE approach in their organisations and received ongoing mentoring by NDS. The aim was to establish a common framework and develop the knowledge, skills and resources to deliver quality CE support.

An evaluation of the pilot had two aims.¹² First, to assess employment, educational, and social outcomes between the CE participants and a comparison group comprising of similar young people from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey 2018. Second, to analyse the extent of participation in various aspects of CE and assess which of these needed further development.

Of the 500 students who took part in the initial pilot, 14 responded to the evaluation, 7 were still in school and 7 had left school, which is only a response rate of 3%.

In summary, according to the evaluation of the CE participants who had left school have higher rates of labour market participation, school completion, social participation and independence, compared to the comparison group.

Discussion

In Australia, Customised Employment is a relatively new approach to obtaining open employment for people with disability. Having originated in the United States and Canada Customised Employment offers an alternative pathway to employment for those people with disability who traditionally have been denied their right to employment. This right is outlined in Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.¹³

States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

Customised Employment in some respects is quite straight forward, but in other respects quite complex. It 'requires a high level of competence and flexibility on the part of the employment specialist to identify employer needs and match them with a young person's competencies and available resources.' Customised Employment may require on the job training and support involving long-term follow-up with the employee and employer.¹⁴

Adopting a Customised Employment approach may challenge the beliefs of some staff. The approach is based on an employment first approach for all regardless of their level of support needs.¹⁵ Smith et al., (2018) found in their examination of embedding a Customised Employment approach in an organisation can be as much about 'moving on' the wrong staff as it is about enriching the practice of the right staff. For example, in the evaluation of the NSW Transition to Work program outcomes delivered by some providers outcomes were poor, and one contributing factor was the low expectations of staff.¹⁶

Conclusion

Well over 30 years ago, the Commonwealth Disability Services Act (DSA) was legislated as a means of improving the social and economic participation of people with disability. Since its introduction, multiple government inquiries into the workforce participation rate of people with disability have been conducted without any significant change being implemented. Currently, the NDIA has developed the NDIS Participant Employment Strategy 2019-2022 to increase the rate of workforce participation for people with disability.

To improve outcomes, good intentions are insufficient. To increase employment for people with disability, effective models of support need to be implemented, along with skilled staff who believe people with disability should and can be in employment in their communities. More broadly, policy makers should consider Customised Employment as an alternative approach to facilitating the social and economic participation of people with disability and particularly the successful transition of students from school to work.

CASE STUDY:

Kyal Chamberlain

Kyal's Doggy Delights business owner

Kyal Chamberlain is a 19 year old dog biscuit Entrepreneur with autism and ADHD. He started out by making healthy treats for the family husky Apollo, which soon turned into a successful business with thousands of happy furry customers.

Kyal began his micro-business 'Kyal's Doggy Delights' when he was 16, he participated in the School to Work transition pilot in Western Australia through Rocky Bay disability service, funded by the NDIA. The Rocky Bay staff were trained and mentored to use Customised Employment techniques. This approach tailors the unique abilities of the person to match the needs of the business, or in Kyal's case using his cooking skills to create his own business. "I have autism and ADHD and cooking is relaxing and fun for me" said Kyal.



Customised Employment has four essential components, Discovery, Job Search Planning, Job Development and Negotiation and Post-Employment Support. During the Discovery Phase, it was determined that Kyal prefers hands-on practical activities. He is a meticulous worker and does everything to a high standard.

The Rocky Bay staff worked with Kyal through the Discovery process and discovered his interest to combine cooking with and his love of animals.

Kyal felt that Apollo, the family husky, deserved some healthy home-made treats, after doing online research on recipes, his first batch of cookies was a huge success. Apollo firmly chose Kyal's home made biscuit over a commercial treat. Anna from Rocky Bay approached Bolt Coffee, a dog friendly café to trial Kyal's dog biscuits.

Steve, owner of Bolt Coffee was happy to give Kyal's biscuits a one week trial. Kyal delivered a sample batch and every single biscuit sold. Bolt Coffee soon became the first stockist, followed by the family's dog groomer 'Puppy Love' and many others followed suit. Some local businesses that sell Kyal's cookies by the jar include Syd and Phyllis, Cafe Mojo, Urban Grind on Royal and The Organic Circle. There is also larger stockists that sell by the bag, including the Garden Café, The Robot Bun Factory, Mr Bones and Canine Unleashed Doggy Day care.

Kyal is currently making more than 2,000 biscuits a week, including hemp biscuits' as well as 'pupcakes' and Doggy Breath Mints, all made by hand. Canine Unleashed Doggy Day care is one of Kyal's largest suppliers when it comes to birthday cakes for dogs. There is at least 1 order per month for a pupcake from the day care clients.

Kyal continually modifies his recipe, so that he gets the best possible taste for his canine customers. He now has 12 flavors available and he caters for many dog dietary needs of dogs, including grain free, gluten free, egg free, vegan and vegetarian biscuits. His hemp biscuits' provide many benefits for dogs, including reducing anxiety, barking and hip problems.

Kyal has used social media to grow his business through the Facebook page @kyalsDoggyDelights and Instagram @kyalsdoggydelights and he is in the process of building a website.

The business is a family affair, Kyal's twin brother Benji has designed the branding. As Kyal has taken over the family kitchen, Kyal and his family are in the process of building a kitchen in the back yard. It is getting close to completion. Kyal was the 2018 inaugural Microenterprise Grantee for One2One, so he has purchased ovens and commercial equipment for the new kitchen.

"I am so proud of Kyal and this has made him feel worthwhile and shows what he can achieve."

Kyal says the best part about his job making dogs and their owners happy.

Kyal's business remains strong even throughout COVID-19 economic downturn, he has continued to receive orders through his Facebook page, Instagram and word of mouth.

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