

Editorial

In this issue, Riesen, Morgan, and Griffin (2015) have written a most timely review article on customized employment. They have searched the literature and identified 25 articles, which help to inform the current conversation about customized employment: what it is, what it isn't, and its overall efficacy. This paper comes out at the same time that the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act ([WIOA Public Law 113-128], 2014) is approaching the end of its first year. This law features supported employment and customized employment with a unique emphasis on transition services for youth with disabilities. This new emphasis is most welcome given the knowledge that we now have that is showing strong correlations between paid employment before exiting high school and employment in adulthood. Carter, Austin, and Trainor (2011, 2012) demonstrated this using National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 data for youth with intellectual and also severe disabilities. Also using the NLTS2 database, Wehman, Sima, et al. (2015) showed high correlations between paid work while in school and competitive employment upon graduation. Siperstein, Heyman, and Stokes (2014) also had similar findings from a Gallup Poll.

For those with more significant disabilities and challenges, supported employment and customized employment are two increasingly utilized pathways for entering and maintaining competitive employment. WIOA defines supported employment as competitive integrated employment, in which employees with disabilities work full or part-time at minimum wage or higher, and are fully integrated with workers without disabilities (Riesen et al., 2015; WIOA, 2014). Supported employment includes a variety of comprehensive and long-term support services designed to enhance job retention and advancement for individuals with disabilities (Wehman et al., 2012). With the passage of WIOA, supported employment was modified to include a definition of customized employment for the first time. WIOA defines customized employment as competitive integrated employment for an individual with a significant disability that is based on a personalized determination of the person's strengths and interests, and is designed to meet the specific needs and abilities of both the individual and employer (Riesen et al.,

2015; Wehman, Brooke, et al., 2015; Wehman, Chan, Ditchman, & Kang, 2014; WIOA, 2014). Customized employment is a flexible process, designed to meet the needs of the job candidate with a disability, as well as the employer, and can take form as a task reassignment, job carving, and job sharing, or lead to a new or modified job description (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.; Wehman, Brooke et al., 2015). For some time there has been confusion in the field about the differences and overlap between these two terms.

There has been quite a significant amount of published research on supported employment over the past 25 years at varying levels of evidence based on the population (e.g., Drake, Bond, & Becker, 2012; Wehman, et al., 2014). There has been considerably less published in the customized employment area, which is why this paper by Riesen and colleagues will be helpful. Notably only 10 of the 25 papers Riesen et al. found were empirical and with small N and level IV evidence. Their literature review provides a quick look at the different papers published, what they offer, and perhaps most importantly what they did not offer yet and where new serious research needs to be headed. As one who has been in the field and part of the original supported employment beginnings 35 years ago, I can say that both of these approaches are welcome pathways to the end game: competitive employment that is individualized into real work settings that offers choice, dignity, inclusion, a pay check, and possibly benefits as well. In either pathway the paradigm shift is intact, that of providing services in the center or the church basement or workshop or clinic and instead in business and industry with the supports as needed. The rehabilitation techniques described in customized employment have been utilized with varying degrees of success for many years by experienced supported employment specialists. However, with the unique emphasis on utilizing customized employment techniques for especially challenging individuals with complex disabilities, this is yet a further way to examine the efficacy and fidelity of clinical practices. In short, it is all good especially since WIOA is now calling for essentially seamless transition (Certo et al., 2008) from school to employment.

There are many provisions, in addition to supported and customized employment in this law that will help

improve employment outcomes. My colleague Grant Revell (2015) has been kind enough to share information on these provisions and they are listed below.

I.) Services for Transition from School to Adult Life in WIOA

A.) 15% of state Title I VR Funds must be used for “pre-employment transition services.”

- 1.) Required services to be provided:
 - Job exploration counseling
 - Work based learning experiences
 - Counseling on post-secondary opportunities
 - Workplace readiness training
 - Training on self-advocacy
- 2.) Additional specified activities allowed if funding is available

VR Area Office Employment Transition Requirements

- Work with workforce boards, One-Stops, & employers to develop employment opportunities
 - Attend IEP Meetings
 - Work with schools to ensure provision of pre-employment transition services
 - When invited, attend person-centered planning meetings
- 3.) Limitations in payment of sub-minimum
 - As of 2016, a series of steps must be taken before an individual under the age of 24 can be placed in a job paying less than minimum wage
 - Prohibits schools from contracting with subminimum wage providers

B.) Changes in Youth Services under WIOA

- 1.) Age for eligibility for Out-of-School Youth Services changed from 16 to 21 to 16 to 24
- 2.) In-School Youth Services age remains 14 to 21 – except students with disabilities who can be served prior to age 14
- 3.) Amount of youth funds spent on out-of-school youth increase from 30% to 75%
- 4.) Virtually all youth with disabilities now eligible

C.) Workforce Investment Youth Services Required Program Elements

| <i>Continuing from WIA</i> | <i>New Under WIOA</i> |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tutoring, study skills training, and instruction ● Alternative secondary school offerings or dropout recovery services ● Paid and unpaid work experience ● Occupational skill training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Integrated education and training for a specific occupation or cluster ● Financial literacy education ● Entrepreneurial skills training ● Services that provide labor market information about in-demand industry sectors and occupations ● Postsecondary preparation and transition activities |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leadership development activities ● Supportive services ● Adult mentoring ● Follow-up services ● Comprehensive guidance and counseling | |

II.) Cross-Systems Collaboration

A.) Vocational Rehabilitation and Partnerships with Other Agencies

- 1.) Formal Cooperative Agreement between VR and State Medicaid and IDD Agency on delivery of VR Services, including delivery of extended services
- 2.) 50% of Funds received by VR under the Supported Employment State Grants will be used to support youth with the most significant disabilities (up to age 24)
- 3.) These youth may receive extended services (ongoing support to maintain an individual in supported employment) for up to 4 years

B.) Workforce Investment Partnership Requirements under New Structure

- 1.) Unified State Planning requirements with VR
- 2.) Changes to Workforce Board Level
- 3.) Changes to Services Offered/Available

C.) Employer Engagement Strategies of Workforce Investment & VR Systems

- 1.) Providing training and technical assistance to employers regarding the employment of individuals with disabilities, including disability awareness, the requirements of ADA, and other employment laws
- 2.) Working with employers regarding individuals with disabilities to provide

- opportunities for work-based learning experiences, recruit qualified applicants, train employees, and promote awareness of disability related obstacles to employment
- 3.) Providing consultation, technical assistance and support to employers on workplace accommodations, assistive technology, and facilities and workplace access
 - 4.) Assisting employers with utilizing available financial support for hiring or accommodating individual with disabilities
- III.) Changes in Performance Measures for Core Programs
- A.) Core Programs
- 1.) Subject to common indicators of performance
 - 2.) Core programs are VR, Adult Dislocated Worker and Youth Workforce Programs, State Employment Service (Wagner-Peyser), and Adult Literacy
- B.) Performance Measures for Adult Are
- 1.) Entering and retaining employment
 - 2.) Median earnings, effectiveness in serving employers
 - 3.) Obtaining an educational credential
 - 4.) Skill gains via post-secondary education and training
 - 5.) Effectiveness in serving employers

The WIOA provides an excellent platform for expanding supported employment and customized employment services, especially with a strong focus on youth with disabilities. This will help move toward a seamless transition. However, research on the efficacy of customized employment, cost, differentiation from supported employment, and in general, the necessity to more carefully operationalizes the different aspects of the model remain to be studied and tested. Much work remains but it is good work for those interested in continuing to expand our knowledge in this important area.

In addition to this important review paper on customized employment, Dr. John Kregel recently presented the Ways and Means Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives on removing obstacles to employment by making Social Security Disability Income work better for beneficiaries. The data in

this report are must-reads for employment specialists and other professionals in the employment disability area.

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