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Conversations with the Experts

Customized Employment



Bio: Susan B. Parker, the Director of Policy and Research in the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), U.S. Department of Labor, has 30 years of experience in community organizations; top leadership posts in the two state governments (Maine and New Hampshire); the U.S. Government (Social Security Administration and the Department of Labor); Rehabilitation International, a federation of 200 disability organizations and ministries in all world regions; and the United Nations. Her appointments at Rehabilitation International (Secretary General, 1993-1998) and the International Labor Organization (ILO, Geneva: 1998-2001) focused on building policy and program support within the United Nations for disability issues.

Ms. Parker's present work is focused on building new policy options to increase the rate of employment of working-age people with disabilities in the United States. As such, she manages five policy and research offices engaged in product development to assist in the recruitment and retention by employers (public and private) of workers with disabilities.

Bio: Christopher Button, Ph.D., is Supervisory Policy Advisor, Adult Policy Team at ODEP. The Adult Policy Team focuses on removal of structural, policy, and other workforce barriers to employment for people with disabilities. Dr. Button leads team activities in policy analysis, research, and program design and implementation to identify and develop policy directions, develop and expand best practices, and secure stakeholder collaboration.

Dr. Button's 35-year career in the disability arena includes work as a legislative aide on disability issues in the US Senate and as senior management within a private national disability nonprofit organization. She has also worked as a special education teacher, school administrator, and university instructor.

Bio: Lisa Cuozzo served as a Policy Advisor with ODEP from January-June 2007. She is the director of Program Operations for TransCen, Inc., where she also works as the Project Manager for the Maryland Customized Employment Partnership, an ODEP grant funded from 2003-2007. With TransCen, she has coordinated the organization's efforts in many partnerships, including the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (efforts in High School/High Tech programs nationwide), the Montgomery County Partnership for All Youth, and the Region III Community Rehabilitation Providers Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program at the University of Maryland. She is a seasoned trainer with expertise in transition (from school-to-career), job development and business partnerships.

Bio: Carol Boyer has been a Policy Advisor for ODEP since 2006. She has more than 20 years' experience in the disability field. Prior to her position with ODEP, Ms. Boyer worked for the U.S. Department of Justice, Disability Rights Section, providing technical assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In addition, she has held positions with three U.S. Department of Education-funded programs, as Project Director for the ADA Technical Assistance contract, Project Associate for RESNA's (the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society for North America) Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance grant, and Media Manager for the National Rehabilitation Information Center. Ms. Boyer is an experienced trainer on disability sensitivity.

An Interview with Susan B. Parker, Christopher Button, Lisa Cuozzo, and Carol Boyer

By Karen Corday and Judi Casey

Corday: What is customized employment?

Parker: Customized employment is 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 between the strengths, conditions, and interests of a job candidate and the identified 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.

Corday: Could you give some examples of different kinds of customized employment?

Cuozzo: Customized employment can take many forms. Most traditionally, it comes through job carving, which may also be thought of as task reassignment within traditional job descriptions. It may also be restructuring within one or more job descriptions as well as self-employment and other entrepreneurial activities. The bottom line is that all of these examples result in responsibilities that are created specifically for the needs of an employer and the skills of an incumbent or new worker.

Button: I'd like to add that customized employment is the ultimate in creativity and flexibility for organizing a job for any worker who, for whatever reason, would have difficulty with or would choose not to take a traditional path to employment. It may be because the worker is someone with a disability. It may be because there are complex issues in their lives that impact their ability or desire to be working full-time or to meet all the tasks of the posted job description. Through customized employment, you have a way to figure out how to match the job tasks for that individual and at the same time meet the needs of the employer.

Parker: The biggest takeaway is that customized employment gets out of the usual pre-conception that this is only for people with disabilities. It's for people who have fairly complicated lives for a lot of different reasons.

Button: Most managers do some amount of customizing within their group of employees anyway. One might assign a worker to certain tasks because of his or her particular expertise or interests. There is any number of reasons that a workload is divided in the way that it is. Customized employment allows one to do it a little more formally. You may also look beyond the job's tasks to other needs that the worker may have, such as child care, transportation, or other areas that present challenges.

Parker: An essential element within this process is that negotiation must be front row and center. If you look at how we traditionally have obtained jobs, there was very little negotiation; it was a cut and dry situation in terms of the job's requirements and the worker's qualifications. There was very little opportunity for discovery to occur in terms of what the employer might be looking for beyond the stated job description as well as other, valuable characteristics of the employee. This process of negotiation provides the opportunity to get to know the job seeker in depth, which is essential if that individual has significant barriers to employment. It is also essential when there's an emerging labor force in which there's an imbalance between available jobs and labor.

Button: Susan mentioned discovery; this is an essential part of the process of achieving a customized employment outcome. Just as an attorney does discovery when looking into the facts of a case, discovery is an alternative form of assessment to discover or uncover the interests, needs, desires, abilities, and strengths of an individual who has some barrier to employment.

I also want to highlight the fit between customized employment and workplace flexibility. The traditional ways in which people consider workplace flexibility are typically flexibility around hours of work, place where work is conducted, and days worked. Customized employment goes beyond these traditional forms of flexibility to include job tasks. As an example, there are many older workers who are currently working and close to retirement but want to continue in the workplace for some period of time. Many of these workers do not want to continue their traditional jobs in terms of hours and work load, but they want to stay connected and involved. Customized employment offers a strategy for helping to keep older workers in the workforce.

Corday: Who are some of the people that benefit from customized employment?

Cuozzo: The truth of the matter is that any person could theoretically benefit from customized employment. Think of it both in terms of supply as well as demand. Employers benefit because they are working with employment consultants who really get to know their business and their unmet needs, and then recruit and retain people for positions that will benefit many job descriptions. From the supply end, anyone who has an employment barrier that makes it difficult to apply for or keep a job with a traditional job description can benefit. It could be someone with a disability, a returning veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder or a traumatic brain injury, or a worker who needs a flexible work schedule and can accomplish specific tasks but not others.

We have worked with all parts of the workforce in terms of discovering workers' skills, working with employers to define their needs, and making or creating matches that work for both sides: the employer and the job seeker.

In fact, customized employment only works when it benefits the employer—making money, increasing customer service, et cetera. For example, we went into a retail establishment in which the shoe department was the most heavily trafficked area in the entire store. The store had received many complaints about the department's disarray and the amount of empty racks. It turned out that tasks such as unloading shipments and stocking them on the sales racks fell under customer service representatives' "other duties as assigned." By talking to this employer about their needs, we determined together that the business could use workers to come in and specifically work with the shoe department only. All other workers could work in the entire store as needed, but because this department generated such high revenue, we helped them create a position in which someone came in for four hours every day to unpack shoe shipments and make sure that they were organized and put out for display. Ultimately, this worker became adept at what he was doing and could take on new tasks as well. Therefore, the store improved not only their customer service ratings, but also the amount of profit generated by the shoe department.

An example of how customized employment can benefit an individual comes from a young man with a very complex life. This man was a veteran, but had a non-service related disability: paraplegia resulting from a serious accident. He had been employed as a paralegal prior to the accident, and did not believe that he could work again without an employer feeling sorry for him and hiring him out of pity. We worked with him and helped him to understand what his body could and could not do, as he really did not know. We placed him into a transitional paid work experience within which he could apply his skills and see that he could actually do this type of work again. We then worked with him to get his paralegal certificate and matched him with a law firm that created a position that needed his skills at the time of day he was able to work. He is now working more than 30 hours a week and is a certified paralegal.

Button: ODEP is just finishing up a six-year demonstration on customized employment through three different grant initiatives across the nation. Several of the projects chose to focus on self-employment as a customized outcome. One of my favorite stories involves a grantee in Georgia who worked with a woman with a significant psychiatric disability. This woman was schizophrenic, had been in and out of institutions for her entire life, and was declared unemployable by the system. In the discovery process, the job developers discovered that whenever this woman hallucinated, it was always about boots. She now has her own internet-based boot company for women with large calves, and would like to expand her business eventually to include other accessories. At our grantee conference, she spoke about how no one had ever believed in her before, and what a difference it made in her life to have this customized employment opportunity.

Let me extrapolate the process beyond workers with disabilities. Prior to coming to the Department of Labor, I worked for a large non-profit charity with a big employment arm. We had on staff several national employment experts who chose to work 30 to 40 hours per month. They would negotiate with us what they were willing to do, and they were able to do this because they had something to offer that we needed. Customized employment creates that opportunity for anyone with a life challenge: to offer something useful to an employer. These are not jobs that are built on charity; these are based on real contribution to the workforce.

Casey: How do managers typically see opportunities for customized employment? Do they ever see it as a burden instead of an opportunity?

Cuozzo: You'll get different answers from different employers, but every employer with whom we've created customized positions has seen it as an opportunity. We are able to work with employers and help them figure out how to best do this. Once we are able to show what potential applicants can offer, it becomes a win-win situation.

Button: Customized employment is not for everyone. An employer would never be tasked with having to customize employment for all workers in the organization, although most managers do this to a certain extent without realizing it, as I mentioned before. As our grantees have implemented their projects, there were employers who were not interested in doing this, so the grantees moved on to someone else. One of our interests is to make customized employment more broadly understood so people know about it when they need it. Even if they don't need it now, the need may arise in the future.

Cuozzo: We were recently asked by a very large, well-known corporation to come in and look at four of their job descriptions. These were jobs for which there was a retention problem. Management asked us to look at the jobs and see which pieces of the jobs could be carved out and be incorporated into a separate job. As they

went through their retention difficulties and recruitment practices, they realized that these specific areas would have a focus that they never had before.

Today, every one of us has so much on our plate. We often go into a workplace and ask workers: "If you had someone as an assistant for a half hour every day, what would you have them do?" Invariably, people mention the same tasks. These tasks need to be done, but they interfere with the critical job functions needed for true productivity. As job developers, we can create positions that assist incumbent workers so that they feel more productive and therefore are more productive.

Parker: It helps to think about the employment process as consisting of phases. There's a recruitment phase, a hiring phase, a retention phase, and there are a number of subsets within these phases. Customized employment can be useful at any one of these phases. A heavy staff turnover costs a lot more than a stable employee base. Does customized employment help a business run more smoothly? Oftentimes yes, as illustrated by the shoe department example. Does it improve customer relations? Yes; you can bring focus to very small details, and in retail and in any business the devil is in the details. The carving out of jobs that may not traditionally appear can add value to many establishments. Because of customized employment, work gets done faster and more precisely, employees become more productive, profit increases, work may be organized to flow better, and operations become more efficient.

Corday: How can an employee and his or her employer work together to successfully negotiate a customized employment situation?

Cuozzo: There needs to be an understanding that flexibility can be task-associated rather than hour- or place-associated. When employers are working with employees to figure out the critical aspects of job tasks and places where some tasks are getting in the way of production that might be an opportunity to start a negotiation.

Button: I'd like to give an example from my own team here at ODEP. One of the team members came to me and said that another team member was working on a particular policy area in which she had interest. She wanted to pick up some work in this area and negotiate who would cover what. This was a switching of job areas and responsibilities. It's a continuum, but the idea is for the negotiation results in benefit to the employee and to the employer. With customization, it's possible to take negotiation to a different level in which people with significant, multiple, complex situations in their lives that result from a disability or other situation are able to work and to contribute.

Corday: What types of research would help the case for customized employment?

Button: We are in the process of pulling together information from our six years of demonstrations and are identifying areas of research that we think would be helpful in advancing customized employment. One major area is the way employers use customized employment and benefit from it. Within our initiatives, we have traditionally started the customization process with the individual, and we now want to begin starting with the employers.

Cuozzo: If we're looking at it from the employer perspective, we need to look at global job descriptions across industries in which there is a high turnover rate. This includes retail, food service, health care, and banking. We need to target employers and find out what customization can occur to ensure that they have better retention rates and fewer turnovers.

Button: Another area is targeting certain populations that have a particular need right now. Two that come to mind are senior workers and veterans, particularly returning service members with injuries and a need to keep engaged with work. Research that documents the usefulness of these customized strategies beyond disability would be particularly valuable. Once employers understand how this allows them to bring into their workplaces whole groups of individuals who have not traditionally been a part of the workforce, customization will be much more widely used and more widely available. This in turn benefits disabled employees because it won't be an anomaly for them to come into a job and ask for customization.

Corday: What is your advice for workplace practitioners seeking to implement customized employment opportunities?

Parker: Customized employment needs to be understood by employers in both the public and private sectors. In terms of the public sector, we not only have the federal government, but state and county governments as

well. Smaller businesses also need to be examined; customized employment can appear in self-employment situations, and smaller businesses in general are the fastest growing economic sector in the economy, not just in the United States, but world-wide. The vehicles to get new information out are numerous. Grant efforts and cutting-edge initiatives are important, but so would be newsletters that county and state administrators use, particularly those engaged in hiring.

Button: Customized employment is a tool for the HR manager or EAP practitioner to use with any potential employee who needs assistance of some kind. It can fulfill some of the requirements of the Family and Medical Leave Act. It can address worker shortages.

Cuozzo: In terms of global advice for workplace practitioners, don't feel the need to think inside the box—don't feel that it has to be a pre-existing job description or nothing. Why not be creative and seek to expand the population of your workforce? That's what most businesses want to do anyway, and what most customers want to see.

Boyer: One of my favorite examples revolves around how people write job descriptions. Many descriptions include a requirement such as "Must be able to lift 25 pounds." Well, isn't the point to make sure they can move an object from one place to another? Does it necessarily have to be lifted to do this job? Is there some sort of technology that can help them move it, or does it just have to be moved so this worker can begin work on the object?

Parker: When I was a state government administrator, we used lots of job descriptions that were very out of date and not particularly applicable to today's work world. I know this isn't an uncommon situation.

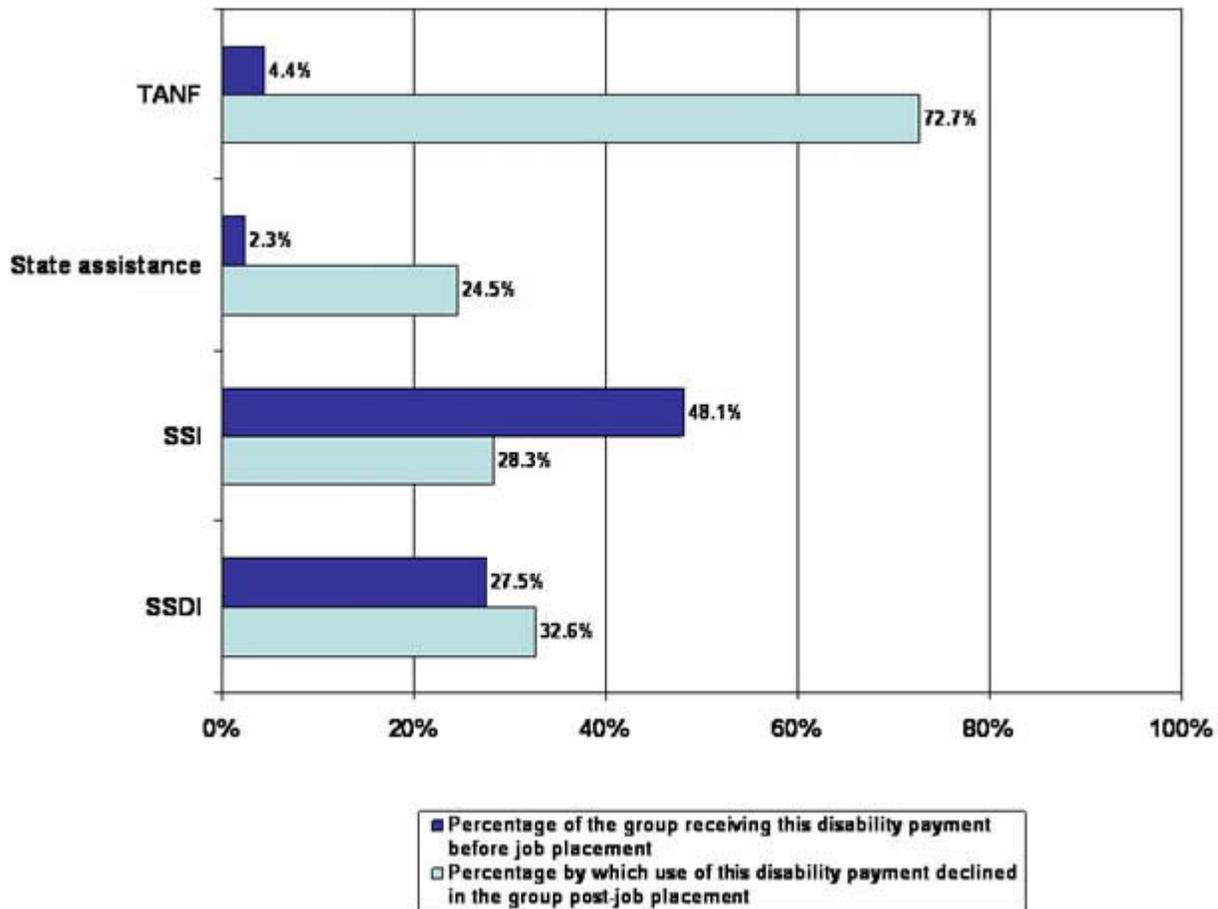
Corday: What can state public policy makers do for their constituents who either need customized employment or want to offer customized employment?

Parker: We need to engage the Directors of Personnel at the state level—every state has one. Like every other subset of employees, they have a national organization. Many county administrators are members of the National Association of Counties. This association is heavily engaged in publishing and providing technical assistance to their various members. There are state organizations across the nation of chief financial officers; they can also benefit. They're always looking for new ways to expand the dollars invested in their employees.

Button: State policy makers can also review their various state authorities – be that general revenue, rehabilitation, workforce investment, or whatever – and determine if opportunities for customization can be accessed through these authorities. The policy makers can make sure that within their own state these customized strategies are available because customization opens the door to employment to many people for whom that door was previously closed.

For more information on the Office of Disability Employment: Customized Employment:
http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/workforce/cust_emp.htm

The Effect of Disability Employment Policy Demonstration Programs



Source: Elinson, L. & Frey, W.D. (2005). *Evaluation of disability employment policy demonstration programs: Task 10: Interim report on ODEP demonstration programs: Accomplishments and issues identified by the independent evaluation.* Washington, DC: Office of Disability Employment Policy. Retrieved August 20, 2007, from http://www.dol.gov/odep/categories/research/policy_programs.htm.

Additional Resources Related to Customized Employment

Americans With Disabilities Act: General Information: ADA publications from the U.S. Department of Justice, including a 31-page overview of the ADA's requirements for ensuring equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities, a guide to disability rights laws, and a guide for people with disabilities seeking employment.

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/publicat.htm#Anchor-14210>

Earnworks.com: "The Employer Assistance & Recruiting Network (EARN) is the nation's premier provider of cost-free services to help employers recruit and hire qualified workers to meet their workforce needs. In addition, EARN assists employers in understanding the practical business reasons for, as well as the practices that facilitate the recruitment and hiring of people with disabilities."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.earnworks.com/>

Job Accommodation Network: A web site from the Office of Disability Employment Policy, "JAN's mission is to facilitate the employment and retention of workers with disabilities by providing employers, employment providers, people with disabilities, their family members and other interested parties with information on job accommodations, self-employment and small business opportunities and related subjects."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/>

National Center on Workforce and Disability/Adult: Customized Employment: A thorough guide for planning all aspects of customized employment. "The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) within the U.S. Department of Labor is committed to improving employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. To achieve this goal, ODEP has established a grant initiative to build the capacity of One-Stop systems to serve all customers, including those with disabilities."

- To access the site, click here: http://www.onestops.info/category.php?cat_id=10

T-Tap: Training and Technical Assistance for Providers: "[A] national technical assistance and training effort designed to increase the capacity of Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and other community-based service providers that currently operate programs that result in segregated work outcomes and non-work options for people with disabilities in the "Special Minimum Wage" program." Funded by ODEP as a cooperative agreement between Virginia Commonwealth University and the Institute of Community Inclusion, UMass Boston.

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.t-tap.org/>

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