

T-TAP

Training and Technical Assistance for Providers

Virginia Commonwealth University & The Institute
for Community Inclusion University of Massachusetts
Boston

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Q & A on Customized Employment: Changing Staff Roles

Does your organization want to expand its employment options to include customized employment and downsize its facility-based services? If so, this shift may require a new or different way of doing business including changes in staff roles and job descriptions. In the process, staff may experience rapid changes in their roles, or sometimes these changes may happen slowly. In either case, staff will have questions about how a shift in providing services may impact the agency and their jobs. This is not unusual and a natural part of the change process. The following questions are typical ones that may be asked by staff when organizations work to assist individuals with disabilities in achieving customized employment outcomes.



Should staff members expect a change in work assignments and their job descriptions if the agency expands its community-based employment program?



This will depend on a number of factors such as how staff members are currently spending their time, the number of individuals with disabilities who want to find customized jobs, as well as your current organizational structure and funding. If all staff members are supporting consumers in facility-based programs, and you do not plan on hiring additional staff, then some job descriptions should change. Typically, when using a customized approach to employment, job descriptions are created or written for employment specialists or job coaches.

Some staff may become specialists in particular roles, or your organization may take a more holistic approach to providing customized services. Using a specialist approach, an organization may identify one position to negotiate work opportunities with community businesses based on the specific interests and abilities of the job seekers. While another position is created to focus on providing job site support that an individual will need to become independent in the workplace. Or, staff job descriptions may be written using a generalist or holistic approach to include all aspects of assisting a job seeker in locating and maintaining a customized job.

Staffing configurations will be different from one organization to another. However, there is generally some commonality in the job duties for staff that will be assisting individuals with customized employment outcomes. The first essential job duty is getting to know the job seeker and his or her abilities, interests, work preferences and potential support needs. The second is meeting with employers to learn about their business needs and negotiating work opportunities that highlight the skills of the job seekers. The third is facilitating and providing workplace supports both on and away from the workplace. The fourth is providing on going / follow-up supports to assist the individual in maintaining employment.



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Q

Our organization's hours of operation have always been 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Staff members have been asking if there will be changes in their daily schedules and if so what?

A

While an employment specialist may expect to work the same number of hours in a week, it is almost certain that staff members' schedules will change. In addition, the location of services will shift from facility-based to community-based. A customized employment approach requires doing business at times and places that are convenient for those served; both individuals with disabilities and employers. For example, a staff member may need to meet job seekers with disabilities in their homes or other community locations to learn about their personal abilities and potential support needs. Or, staff members will need to meet with prospective employers at their businesses and at times convenient to them.

Once a customized job has been identified, it may mean that the individual is employed but not necessarily from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Individuals with disabilities will have various preferences about where they would like to work as well as the time of day. Other factors may impact their work schedule such as when transportation is available to and from the workplace. Every business will have its own scheduling needs as well.

Sometimes, a negotiated work schedule will fall within a typical work week, and at other times it will not. Staff may be expected to provide services early in the morning, later at night or on Saturday, Sunday, or any other day of the week. Staff availability and flexibility will be essential to providing customized employment services. An employment specialist's schedule will change as the workers' with disabilities schedules change.

An organization must develop policies and procedures to ensure that both their consumers as well as personnel get what they need. For instance, some employment specialists may actually prefer night or weekend work or like getting paid extra to do so. Others may only want or be able to work during specific hours. Each organization will have to decide on the best staff configuration for them and make sure that job descriptions reflect these policies and procedures. Temporary and part time staff members might be considered to provide flexibility in providing supports when and where an individual wants them. In addition, individuals with somewhat inflexible schedules may be better suited to provide employer marketing and job negotiation services, while others who have more flexibility provide on the job support services. Ultimately, staff must be committed to providing support to individuals with disabilities during the hours and days of the week that customized jobs are available.

Q

Several staff members have wondered if a change in job description will mean a raise in salary? Should they expect a raise?

A

This decision will ultimately be up to the leadership in the organization. Staff may receive higher hourly wages, performance-based compensation, or a salary with benefits. There is no current research available on average salaries for such personnel. Sometimes, benefits can offset lower salaries, depending on the applicant's situation. For example, single people may be interested in educational reimbursement, while seniors will want to know about retirement benefits. There is no doubt that the best way to ensure the future of customized employment is to have well trained personnel who earn a decent wage. It is also important to remember, that lower salaries could be indicative of devaluing the service offered and the role of the employment specialist. However, in the end the salary range established for the position will depend on the organizations' resources.

Q

What can an organization do if some staff members are not "on board" with the organizational change?

A

This may stem from fear related to lack of information about what is occurring within the organization. Keep in mind that people change when they are pursuing their own goals! Management must involve staff in setting the goals and objectives for change and communicate regularly. This includes beginning with a clear mission statement and set of values for your organization.

If some staff members lack enthusiasm and have down beat attitudes, a barrier can be created. You can help in a number of ways. Begin by providing leadership and

being excited and up beat. Stay focused and keep positive. This can take your organization a long way! Also, acknowledge potential fears and apprehensions by encouraging personnel to raise concerns and comment openly. If concerns are not voiced, consider anonymity. For instance set up a "concern box" where staff can anonymously raise their questions and receive answers.

Keep staff up-to-date and provide the information that they need to understand the change process. Realize that staff may not have the knowledge that is needed to facilitate customized employment outcomes. For instance, they may have always believed that individuals with disabilities are best supported in facility-based settings. Staff may not realize that by customizing a job to an individual's interests and abilities and by providing training that many of the barriers that have prevented employment can be overcome. Share stories that showcase workers' with disabilities successes in the workplace. Provide support by listening to staffs' concerns and help them get informed about the positive aspects of customized employment. Remember that people do not change simply because they are told to do so. However, conditions can be created that allow people to develop their personal and shared visions for the organization.

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How can my organization shift its staff resources from facility-based services to customized employment?

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Identifying another agency or organization that has been successful in moving staff resources from one program service to another might be one place to begin. Another first step might be to determine how staff members are currently spending time within the organization to identify ways that this could change. T-TAP has developed a Staff Time Log that provides a snapshot of staff time investment. This form can be downloaded by going online to the following URL: <http://www.t-tap.org/strategies/change/stafftimelog.doc>

The Staff Time Log can be used to answer questions such as, "are we shifting resources from facility-based services to community support over time," "are we investing enough in job development," and so forth. The Staff Time Log is completed for one full calendar week by all staff, with the possible exception of staff that has purely administrative roles (e.g. the business manager or receptionist). Staff members indicate the primary activity for each 30-minute interval during the day. Ideally, they should complete the form as the day goes on and memories are fresh.

An agency needs to be sensitive to staff concerns about using this tool. Depending on the organizational culture, staff may be allowed to complete the form anonymously. This may be done either by returning Logs directly to an external evaluator or by having staff hand them in without identifying themselves. The goal is to look at resource allocation, not individual staff performance, to determine how these resources might best be allocated for facilitating customized employment outcomes.

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What training will staff need to be able to provide customized employment?

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Many staff members will find that they already possess much of the knowledge and skills needed to succeed. What they do not know or cannot do they can learn through staff development activities such as workshops, readings, discussions with seasoned personnel, and practical field-based experience. Staff development usually focuses on three interrelated areas of performance: attitudes, skills, and knowledge.

Basic thoughts about the ability of people with disabilities to work, their right to make decisions, and take risks are examples of attitudes that may affect staff performance. Staff members must have or develop the belief that all individuals with disabilities are capable of working, making choices, and contributing to their communities. Staff members who are in agreement that customized employment is a good thing are already on their way to successfully supporting individuals with disabilities to achieve inclusive employment outcomes.

Staff members who do not believe in customized employment strategies are not likely to be successful. For example, an employment specialist may be very savvy at meeting with businesses, but if he or she does not believe a job can be negotiated for a person with a significant disability, the desired result of a job offer most likely will not occur. Staff must also understand the mission of their organization. Those who embrace the goals of the program and shared vision will be committed to success.

Knowledge relates to a workers' ability to understand how they are to perform certain tasks. This assumption is that given proper input, support and resources employment staff will know what to do effectively to perform their jobs. Skills refer to being able to apply one's knowledge in a given situation. For example, an employment consultant may understand the recommended way to approach job negotiations after listening to a lecture, but lack the confidence to follow the recommendations when meeting with an employer. In this scenario, the employment specialist has the knowledge and motivation to negotiate a work opportunity, but she requires skills development to be successful.

An organization will need to take the steps necessary to ensure that staff gain the knowledge and develop the skills needed to carry out the core responsibilities for facilitating customized employment outcomes. Make sure that staff members understand the organization, its mission, values, history, structure, and interfacing of various divisions along with their role and responsibilities. Assist staff in acquiring the necessary knowledge and to develop a vast array of skills. This includes those skills associated with time management, effective communication, creative problem solving, removing barriers to employment, identifying job seeker strengths, abilities and support needs, promoting choice and decision making, connecting with and building business relations, negotiating creative work structures, and providing or facilitating employment supports. Support staff and assist them by formulating staff development plans that have clear action steps. Provide positive feedback as they move into their new roles and responsibilities. Celebrate their successes as they assist individuals in achieving customized employment outcomes.



We still need to hire new staff. Do you have any recommendations?



When hiring employment specialists, managers may gain the best insight about a candidate's attitudes, knowledge, and skills by asking behavior-based questions. One way to derive a list of interview questions is to start by reviewing the job description and selection criteria. Responses to behavior-based questions reflect what the person might do in a similar situation. Here is an example of a role-play situation and associated interview questions.

KFI (Katahdin Friends, Inc.), who is a member of T-TAP's CRP Leadership Mentor Network, recommends the following when hiring new staff:

- Hire people for their values, rather than their experience, certifications, or degrees.
- Hire people from the same community as the people supported.
- Hire people who can describe how they are connected to their communities.
- Hire people that are knowledgeable about their community and its businesses.
- Involve people with disabilities and family members in the hiring process.
- Ask, "Is the person someone that we could stand up and cheer about?"
- Please visit T-TAP at <http://www.t-tap.org> to read more about their experiences with changing staff roles.

Information for this FAQ sheet came from:
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For more information on T-TAP, please visit:
<http://www.t-tap.org>