

# EMPLOYMENT

## YOU MAY HAVE HEARD THAT ...

- People with developmental disabilities are not competent enough to have paid, meaningful work opportunities
- People with developmental disabilities cannot work or they will lose their benefits



## THE REALITY IS ...

Individuals with disabilities **can** pursue paid, meaningful careers. It's true that many individuals with disabilities have been let down by the traditional employment process (in this context, we mean the typical, competitive hiring process in which a job candidate's employability is measured against the qualifications and requirements of a specific position). The good news is, there is an alternative! Through a process called Customized Employment (CE), job seekers can obtain jobs that are valued and tailored to their unique strengths and interests.

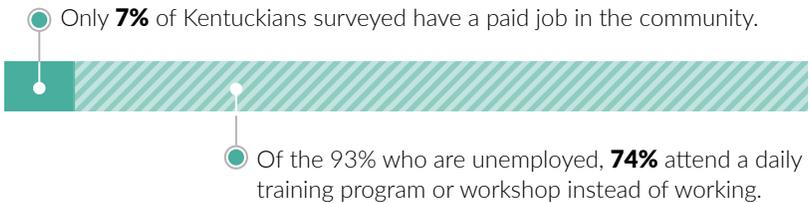
Additionally, there are ways for individuals to earn income without jeopardizing their benefits. A person who works and receives social security benefits will always earn more money than a person who relies solely on social security benefits.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANINGFUL WORK & THE CHALLENGES JOB CANDIDATES FACE

Having paid, meaningful work is important for many reasons. It provides income, a way to connect with others, and a sense of purpose and self-sufficiency. Unfortunately, data from the Human Development Institute's National Core Indicators report reflects what Mattingly Edge already knows from experience—that too often adults with developmental disabilities (especially those with a high impact of disability) lack opportunities to pursue meaningful, well-paid work.

**Figure 1 - Kentuckians receiving Medicaid Waiver Services with a Paid, Community Job:**



To understand why employment numbers among adults with disabilities are so low, we might first turn our attention to the second statistic in Figure 1 (shown above). The unfortunate reality is, adults with disabilities are not generally expected to join the workforce—instead they are encouraged to pursue adult day training programs where they are segregated from the broader community. When society limits its expectations of individuals with disabilities, it limits their access to opportunities for typical, valued experiences. In other words, if no one in a person's life expects them to work (much less have a career valued by others) then it is not likely that they will be encouraged to try new or difficult things—experiences that lead the typical person to explore and cultivate employable skills.

For the 7% who do pursue work in the community, many have found

<sup>1</sup> The statewide statistics represented in this graphic come from the Human Development Institute's (HDI) National Core Indicators Report (2018-19) which collected data from adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities age 18 and older receiving Medicaid Waiver services in the state of Kentucky. Data from HDI's 2019-20 report was not released at the time of this publication.

traditional employment models to be ineffective at helping them realize their career goals. Traditional employment models are especially ineffective for those experiencing significant impact of disability.

These challenges highlight the need for thoughtful, innovative employment practices that focus on making the job-seeking process more accessible, expanding opportunities for paid, meaningful work, and broadening our collective understanding of what's possible.

## THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL EMPLOYMENT SERVICES & CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT



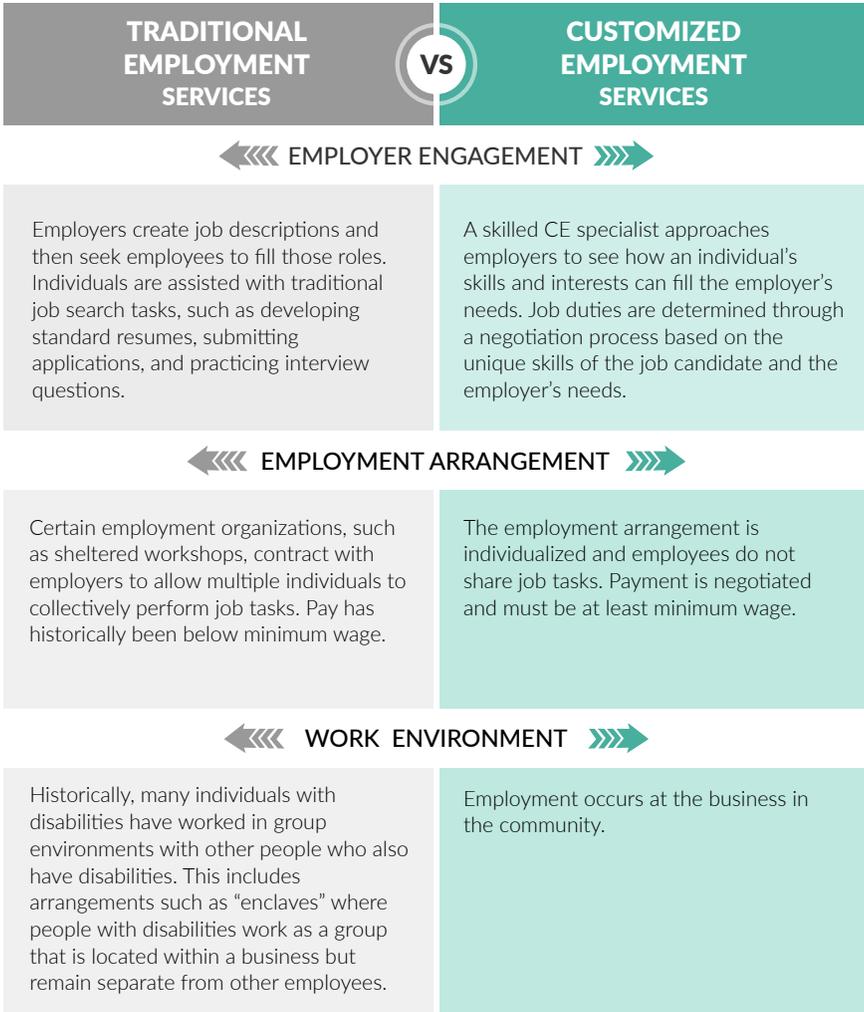
Historically, employment services for people with disabilities have been limited to assisting job candidates to navigate the traditional employment process or, alternatively, to provide work opportunities through specialized work centers. For those who experience a disability that poses significant barriers to the traditional, competitive employment process, work centers have commonly been viewed as the only option. In these environments people with disabilities are segregated into a work site to perform tasks that are seen as undesirable by much of the broader workforce and for which they are often paid a sub-minimum wage. Fortunately, there has been a move away from segregated work centers in recent years in favor of supported employment services.

Employment services that focus on helping job candidates navigate the traditional employment process generally focus on resume-building and interview skills. With these services, it is generally expected that the individual will seek employment through the traditional process of applying to a typical job posting and go through the usual interview and hiring process. While these services may assist some individuals to successfully secure employment, it is often insufficient for those who experience significant impact of disability.

Customized Employment (CE) is a type of supported employment that starts from the assumption that even those who experience a significant impact of disability can bring skills and strengths to the workplace. CE 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 acknowledges that traditional means of securing employment present a number of barriers for individuals with disabilities and offers a framework for overcoming these obstacles.

**Figure 2 - Traditional Employment Services VS Customized Employment Services:**



# THE CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT PROCESS

Customized employment professionals cannot control the experiences and connections that a job candidate brings to the table. However, they can work around the comparative barriers that are part of the competitive hiring process. Facilitating customized employment occurs in 4 main stages: Discovery, Job Search and Planning, Job Development and Negotiation, and Post-employment Support, with the majority of time spent in the Discovery and Job Development stages.

## Phase 1: Discovery

Through the discovery process, a customized employment specialist works with the job candidate to identify the individual's interests, skills, and conditions for success. In this phase, the focus is on what the job candidate brings to the table. This process is similar to the way that many of us already think about searching for employment. Most people consider their interests, skills, and conditions for success before they begin looking for a job. Therefore, it is natural that customized employment professionals explore these areas alongside a job candidate during the Discovery phase of the process. The goal is to assist the job candidate with questions like: What do you like to do (or can at least tolerate doing) again and again without being asked? What are you good at doing? What do you need (schedule, culture, co-workers, training styles) to be successful in a job? The answers to these questions will provide insight on the job candidate's skills, interests, and conditions for success.

These may seem like simple questions, but uncovering the answers is a process that takes time and experience with the job candidate. For many people with disabilities, this is the first time they have been asked to think about what they can bring to the table for a valued job position. It is not uncommon for people to resort to answers that are typical of roles that have been assigned to them based on the limiting beliefs of others. For these reasons, observation of the individual in a variety of environments is key to the Discovery process. The process may begin with getting to know the job candidate in environments that are familiar to them and branching out over time to the less familiar.

Typically, the process will take a couple of months and will involve a customized employment professional utilizing a number of tools to identify the person's interests, skills, and conditions for success, including:

- Interviews with the job candidate and their family, friends, and supporters
- Observations and interactions with the job candidate in their day-to-day life, with a focus on identifying when the individual is at their best

The customized employment professional takes extensive notes and drafts a narrative report that includes skills, education, past employment, life experiences, living situation, and other relevant details.



### Employment Story - Tricia

Having just graduated Spalding University, Tricia was eager to put her degree to good use and find work. But before she found Edge Employment, Tricia's experience with employment services were tumultuous and less than fruitful. In fact, the first provider she partnered with suggested she take her degree

and apply it to bagging groceries at her local Kroger. Tricia, determined to find work where she could put her hard-won degree to use and her other skills, was excited to learn about Edge Employment's Discovery process which was designed to help her do just that.

**Through the discovery process, an Employment Specialist joined Tricia in the spaces where she typically spent time (officiating swim and dive meets, volunteering to teach adults to swim) and interviewed friends and family who know Tricia best. While officiating, Tricia displayed unbroken focus and communication with other staff for hours on end; volunteering, Tricia revealed her patience and attention to detail; in interviews, Tricia's Employment Specialist discovered her helpfulness and success with self-management.**

At the end of Discovery, Tricia and her Employment Specialist invited important people in her life to join them in a meeting to identify potential employers. One of Tricia's connections invited her to interview at her place of employment—Visionworks, Tricia's Employment Specialist was allowed in the interview to offer supplemental information to the interviewers. Tricia was hired for a part-time position as an Optometric Technician in

Visionworks' reception and pre-test departments. While her Employment Specialist helped to draft a training and on-boarding plan, Tricia was independent on the job from day one. Due to her expertise, she was promoted to full-time with benefits after just four months on the job!

## Phase 2: Job Search & Planning

After a job candidate completes the Discovery phase, the customized employment professional arranges a job-planning meeting. The meeting includes the employment professional, the job candidate, and the job candidate's family and/or supporters who know the job candidate well. It can also include other members of the community, such as a local businessperson or other individuals with ties to industries the job candidate is interested in.

During the meeting, all parties will work together to:

- Review the job candidate's strengths, skills, needs, and interests identified through the discovery process and use the information to develop a list of job tasks that can be shared with potential employers.
- Identify businesses or organizations whose area of work and needs are consistent with the job candidate's skills and interests.
- Develop a plan for making employer contacts

## Phase 3: Job Development & Negotiation

During the Job Development phase, the customized employment professional seeks to present the job candidate's most employable skills and how those skills can address the employer's specific needs. Sometimes this looks like "unbundling" identified tasks from one or more job descriptions to create a new position. This can also look like an employer identifying unmet business needs or tasks currently being performed that would be better performed by someone else to create a customized position. This process differs from traditional supported employment programs that typically only assist a job candidate with navigating the responsibilities of an existing job description. The value of customized employment is that it removes some of the comparative barriers that exist in traditional employment by demonstrating to an employer the specific ways an individual job candidate can meet their needs based on experience and evidence.

As part of the Job Development phase, customized employment professionals seek to understand the needs of a business or organization and identify areas where the job candidate's skills can provide benefit to the employer. The employment professional presents employers with a visual resume that provides information about the job candidate, along with specific examples of the job candidate's skills and abilities. Through this process, a customized employment professional will work with the job candidate and employer to develop a customized job description for the employer based on the job candidate's skills and the employer's needs.



### Employment Story - Gabby

At 26 years old, Gabby exemplifies the importance of intentional job development and planning based on one's unique skills and interests. When asked what Gabby might do for work in the beginning of her employment journey, her family and friends suggested that she tear tickets at a nearby theater. After

spending time with an Edge Employment Specialist, however, Gabby's list of potential contributions was revealed to include digital editing using Photoshop, iMovie, and Microsoft suite, social media management, and amateur photography. **With an understanding of Gabby's unique strengths, the employment team was able to identify businesses where Gabby's skills would be a good fit. Her employment specialist approached a local paint-and-sip studio and helped negotiate a position that benefitted both parties, and Gabby was hired as a part-time Social Media Manager.**

When the studio owner later had to pivot and absorb Gabby's tasks into a full-time management role, she and her Employment Specialist found her work, next, as an Office Assistant for a notable event coordination company. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the event coordination company unfortunately had to close its doors.

With two years of excellent experience under her belt, finding Gabby's next job would have been a breeze if not for the effects of COVID-19. After her Employment Specialist put out a call for employers with a local chamber, Christy Smallwood with Eagle Eye Strategies responded. While learning about Customized Employment, Christy saw a photo of Gabby and gasped, "I know her!" Apparently, the event coordination company was a client of Christy's and she had spoken to Gabby in their office on numerous occasions. She asked to hear more about Gabby and her skills, happily

surprised to learn that Gabby had the knowledge and experience she was looking for in her own business. After Christy showed the Employment Specialist what she needed, it was determined that Gabby's skills and Christy's needs were a match. Gabby was hired by Eagle Eye Strategies to work remotely as a Digital Content Specialist, editing Christy's podcast and crafting custom social media posts. After just three months on the job, her weekly hours were increased and she was awarded a raise!

## Phase 4: Post-employment Support

Once a match is made, customized employment professionals work with the job candidate and the employer to identify any training and support needs. The employment professional remain available to assist as necessary through the initial phase of employment and as long-term support.

## Earning Income While Receiving Government Benefits

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