Using Discovery as a Tool to Increase Employment and Decrease Poverty in Partnership with Centers for Independent Living

Introduction

The Independent Living Philosophy and Movement is steeped in Civil Rights and Social Justice. Disability Rights are Civil Rights. There is passion in the founding belief that everyone ("*All means all*") is entitled to the same rights, options, opportunities, and control over their life choices.

Discovery is the foundation of Customized Employment (CE), which is a proven Evidence-Based Practice. The methodology enables individuals, who have typically been left out of options for competitive integrated employment (CIE), to self-determine and choose the path their career will take. This model is based on the guiding principle of *Zero Exclusion*, i.e., no one is excluded from working.

The values and philosophy of Independent Living (IL) and Discovery/CE are comparable. Both models focus on the capacities and preferences of individuals and honor the individual's life choices. The principle that individuals are in control of the services and supports they need to attain the life they want is endemic to both. Disability is valued as human diversity.

The Centers for Independent Living (CILs) provide five core services of Advocacy, Information and Referral, Independent Living Skills, Peer Support and Mentoring, and Transition. These are uniquely compatible with the Discovery and CE methodology.

> *"Customized Employment is a flexible process designed to personalize the employment relationship between a job seeker and an employer in a way that meets the needs of both…Thus, CE is the outcome that results from an individualized, person-centered*

process. Results in a customized job that will meet the needs that the individual has for employment, the conditions necessary for his or her success, and the needs that the business has for valued, contributing employees.

Thus, CE differs from the typical employment practices used by Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) personnel and Supported Employment (SE) job developers, which aim first to successfully place job seekers within the context of competitive hiring processes and then to provide supports as needed to maintain employment; can only be successful if the job seeker is treated as an individual who is free to make choices about his or her life's direction; is afforded respect and dignity; is assumed to have competencies that, if not readily obvious, can be discovered; is given access in natural settings with minimal intrusion; and is provided with high quality employment opportunities and services.''[1]

Exhibit 1. Comparable Values and Philosophy

IL Values and Philosophy	Discovery & CE Values and Philosophy
Person-Centered	Person-Centered
Individual Choice and Control	Individual Choice and Control
Full community access, inclusion, and participation	Full community access, inclusion, and participation
Self-Determination and Empowerment	Self-Determination and Empowerment
Social and Economic Justice	Social and Economic Justice
Individuals are the experts regarding their needs, supports and services	Conditions for success and supports needed are identified in partnership with the individual and incorporated into how jobs are customized
Individuals are the experts on their life, choices, and support needs	Individual interests, preferences, skills, choices, and support needs guide the process of determining their career path and a good job match for them
Disability is part of Human Diversity	Disability is part of the human experience and is celebrated
Lived experience is valued	Lived experience is valued

What is Discovery?

The IL Movement evolved from a different place than CE. It leads with disability and advocacy. CE focuses on learning when a person is at their best and leads with that. Merging the individual (CE) with the global (IL) allows for a stronger foundation and inclusion of all.

---

[1] U.S. Department of Labor. Office of Disability Employment Policy's Customized Employment Competency Model.

In 1986, Congress added Supported Employment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as "competitive work in integrated settings…for individuals with severe handicaps for whom competitive employment has not traditionally occurred."[2] The assumption was with the "correct" supports and job carving, individuals with significant disabilities would obtain employment. That did not prove to be the case for individuals with complexities. They were not securing [Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)](). Supported Employment aligns with the Labor Market Approach of competition. Competition is deeply rooted in how onboarding occurs. However, it is tricky because it starts with the underlying assumption that a job seeker must compete for the job using competitive standards that frequently have little correlation to the tasks performed in the actual position. Individuals who do not compete well get trapped in this circular logic of "you are not employable because you cannot compete."

Slowly the disability field realized the need for a different approach that did not require competition for individuals to obtain CIE. This approach is CE. The first phase of CE is Discovery. Discovery seeks to understand the best an individual has to offer an employer. It ascertains the type of environment that highlights persons' strengths, the tasks they want to do for pay, and supports needed for success. Discovery starts with who the person is, highlighting what they can do. It translates information learned from the job seeker's daily life through spending time with the person in different settings, interviewing people who know them well, visiting their home, and focusing on their strengths rather than testing and evaluating. These are the same methods used in qualitative research. The job seeker controls the process, and the facilitator seeks permission and direction from the individual. The belief that regardless of the impact of disability or complexities of life, everyone has skills and abilities to offer. This core belief drives Discovery.

The finesse of Discovery is to translate information from the person's daily life into tasks that address an employer's needs. It requires letting go of assumptions and judgments. One must be able to observe or interview without jumping to conclusions. When this occurs, the facilitator of Discovery uncovers competence that leads to possibilities. It requires paying close attention to the overall gestalt of the situation from actions taken, verbal and nonverbal communication, attitudes, etc. Discovery requires keeping an open mind. It is a process that looks at who people are and what they need to be the best in their job. A person cannot fail at Discovery because it is about their life and what they need. The process is descriptive and always optimistic, looking for the best that a person has to offer. It is essential to focus on who the person is rather than our opinions.

Discovery is best viewed as two sides of a coin: the job-seeker and the employer. The facilitator must understand both parties. Tasks are an essential concept in the process. Employers may hire

---

[2] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's [webpage for the Rehabilitation Act of 1973]()

someone due to their resume but, they pay them for the tasks they perform. Many individuals can't complete all the duties within a job description, but they can perform the essential tasks. When tasks are considered that highlight a job seeker's contributions, numerous possibilities come to light. When job titles are the measure, the possibilities are fewer. The Discovery process must include a list of tasks the job seeker can do for pay. The facilitator must understand the employer's unmet needs to ensure the job fits both the job seeker and the employer requirements.

Discovery is a puzzle; figuring out all the pieces in the correct configuration is complex. One piece of the puzzle is the conversation about money. Conversations around money can be difficult. First, money tends to be a taboo issue; second, we all have numerous emotional attitudes related to money, and lastly, there is confusion and misinformation around public benefits. If during Discovery these conversations can start, it will help individuals be on the pathway to economic self-sufficiency.

The two main ways Discovery occurs are through Facilitated Discovery or Group Discovery. Facilitated Discovery is the most common. A professional coordinates and facilitates the Discovery process with the jobseeker. The process results in a plan for employment which includes employers to be contacted. The second approach is [Group Discovery](). Group Discovery involves a small group of job seekers who learn the principles of Discovery and use the group to provide feedback on what they are learning about themselves. This approach has a facilitator and assignments the group members complete outside of the group and bring back for discussion. Both Discovery approaches are powerful tools in creating belief and seeing possibilities.

Both approaches result in not only possibilities in how a person can obtain competitive integrated employment that highlights who they are, but also a pathway to obtaining economic stability which has been denied to so many individuals. Discovery is the first step in helping a person envision and achieve a life out of poverty through employment.

Implementing Key Elements of Discovery into Pre-Employment Transition Services and Supporting Youth in Transition

CILs are a natural fit to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services to youth and young adults with disabilities. Even before assistance to youth in transition became a part of required core services, CILs identified the need and have provided opportunities for youth to learn and engage in advocacy, peer support, and enhance independent living skills as they transition to adult life and to leaders within the IL Movement. While Discovery is a core component of the CE process and should always lead to employment, there are valuable strategies that can be embedded in Individualized Pre-Employment Transition Services.

Exhibit 2. 5 Focus Areas of Pre-Employment Transition Services

Job Exploration Counseling

Work-Based Learning Experiences

Counseling on Opportunities for Post-Secondary Education

Workplace Readiness

Self-Advocacy

Job Exploration Counseling

Students receive support to identify Vocational Themes by matching interests, skills, preferences, and associated tasks. They engage in informational interviews to learn about and obtain advice from experts who do the work they may be interested in.

Work-Based Learning Experiences

Students connect with an expert in an area of interest and engage in a targeted task-oriented Discovery activity, job shadowing or a paid or unpaid work experience. Work experiences are individualized. This enables the student to strengthen or expand skills. Internships are explored based on what is learned through Discovery activities and emerging Vocational Themes.

Counseling on Opportunities for Enrollment in Post-Secondary Education

A foundational principle of CE is to expand possibilities for career growth which may include education and training opportunities. When students have opportunities to try tasks and get advice,

it provides experience-based knowledge to ensure informed choice about a career pathway. Key pieces of the Discovery process involve identifying resources and supports needed, including assistive technology, accommodations, and benefits.

Workplace Readiness

Students participate in individualized, task-based activities that are both familiar and unfamiliar based on the student's preferences. Additionally, the opportunities to connect with experts with similar interests build interpersonal and communication skills in a natural way.

"CE involves a functional, real-time assessment of an individual's skills and talents, based on the assumption that everyone is "work ready"; the development of best match scenarios between work environment, supports, their interests, and work tasks."[3]

Instruction in Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy skills are developed through the natural process of task-based discovery activities, informational interviews, interactions with peers during internships, job shadowing and other work-based learning experiences. Additional tools to strengthen self-advocacy skills is to facilitate the development of visual resumes/portfolios. Students can highlight work-based learning opportunities, strengths, attributes, through a variety of mediums. Visual representations of skills can be adapted/tailored to share with peers, support teams, post-secondary programs, or employers.

---

[3] Griffin C., Hammis, D., Geary T. *The Job Developer's Handbook: Practical Tactics for Customized Employment* (1st ed.), Brookes Publishing (2007).

Exhibit 3. Case Scenario Encompassing the 5 Focus Areas of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and Key Components of the Discovery Process

---

Brandon's Positive Pathway to Employment Utilizing CIL Pre-ETS and CE Strategies

Brandon is 18 years old and plans to attend the post-high school program in the fall. He has a VR counselor and was referred to pre-ETS services through the CIL in his area. Brandon met with the pre-ETS instructor at the VR office with his dad. The Pre-ETS instructor and VR counselor learned that Brandon enjoys welding classes. Using his phone, he showed photos of several pieces that he made. Brandon is not confident about the possibility of getting into the welding course at the technical college and did not want to discuss this.

The Pre-ETS instructor explained to Brandon how informational interviews can be helpful and they could talk to a welder to learn more about welding and obtain advice. The following week, the pre-ETS instructor spent time exploring the local community with Brandon via public transportation and found a small welding shop. Brandon and the instructor set up a time for an informational interview. They learned that "Paul", the small business owner did not obtain formal training and was self-taught. He enjoyed it as a hobby for many years prior to starting his business. He and Brandon readily connected, and he welcomed Brandon to come back to "try out" welding.

The Pre-ETS instructor contacted the VR counselor to share the outcome of the informational interview. They brainstormed possibilities and discussed with Brandon the option of pursuing a paid work experience and apprenticeship with Paul over the summer. Brandon indicated he would like to pursue this opportunity. The negotiation with Paul was successful, and he agreed to mentor Brandon for 3 months. For this invaluable mentoring, Paul received payment for job training. The Pre-ETS instructor provided weekly support as needed regarding instructional strategies. The Pre-ETS instructor took photos and video of Brandon completing tasks for the visual portfolio they planned to develop.

Brandon worked 25 hours per week and developed skills for a possible career path in welding. The Pre-ETS instructor spent approximately 40 hours over the course of the internship/summer. This work experience increased Bandon's confidence. He is now ready to explore courses at the technical college. Brandon and his support team developed a next steps plan. At the beginning of the school year, Brandon shared his visual portfolio with his teachers and classmates and will use it to direct his IEP.

Evidence-Based Leadership and Evidence-Based Management Lead to an Evidence-Based Organization

Evidence-Based Leadership values the latest data regarding how organizations can achieve peak performance. They are comfortable being disruptors of the status quo that is no longer working or may have never resulted in consistent successful outcomes. They embed Evidence-Based Practices into the organizational structure. Training for staff is ongoing and considered vital to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be successful in implementing Discovery and CE as a practice. The leadership value creativity and thoughtful risk taking is encouraged. These organizations thrive.

When embedding Discovery and CE into organizational practice it is important to recognize that leaders can be formal and informal. Any employee who has the ability and skill to act as

influencers and motivators should be recognized and considered as vital to innovation. This fact is an important key for building staff consensus throughout the organization.

Exhibit 3. Elements of Innovation
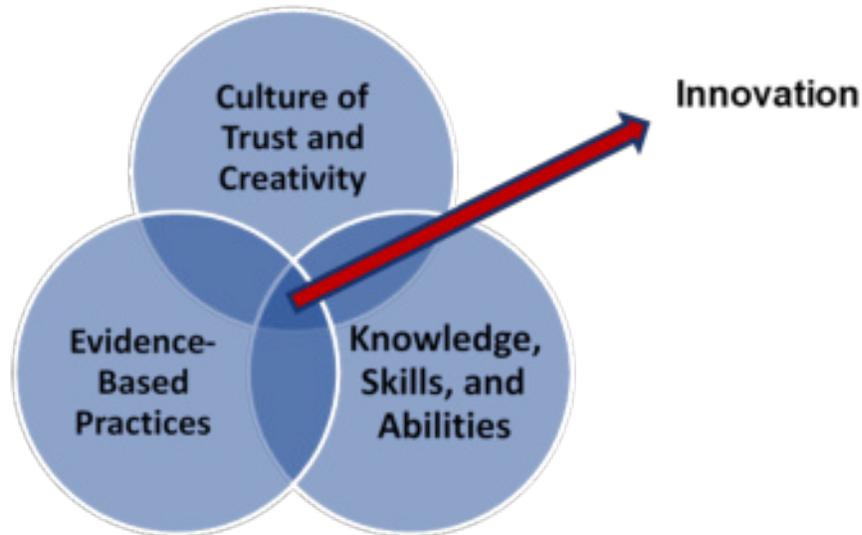
Employee "buy in" develops out of listening to staff, communicating clearly and openly, expecting staff to collaborate, respecting, and valuing staff ideas and celebrating successes. Leaders that provide teams with the time and resources to embed Discovery and CE into practice have a strong team-based culture**.** Effective teams contribute to the overall success of the organizational goal of achieving CE outcomes with fidelity to the processes.

Impactful leaders develop recruiting and hiring protocols that involve experiential interviewing and open-ended value-based questions, within a conversational style. The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) Competency Model contains nine competencies needed by the CE Specialists as well as, the Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other Traits that are related to each competency. It is an effective tool for hiring and coaching. Employment Specialists can be taught methodology, but such characteristics as having a world view that includes visualizing opportunities and possibilities**,** positivity, valuing inclusion and respecting all individuals needs to be identified during the interview process.

It is additionally critical to recognize the importance of diversity in hiring. A workforce that has different life experiences, backgrounds, and differing perspectives expands the opportunities for creativity and innovation. A workforce that reflects the diversity in communities enables the organization to provide better services and support to diverse populations.

Organizations successful in embedding Discovery and CE into practice share similar characteristics[4]:

- Thoughtful risk taking,
- Shared values that direct services/supports delivery,
- Ongoing self-examination,
- Strong partnerships,
- Holistic focus on the individual,
- Emphasis on continuous improvement, and
- Involvement of staff in establishing goals, as well as decision making.

The process of embedding Discovery and CE into practice is nonstop, hard work and involves continual management of:

- Aligning goals, behavior, and processes,
- Planning, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining the methodology, values, and philosophy,
- Ongoing competency-based staff training,
- Coaching and mentoring on a weekly basis to support staff and hold them accountable for obtaining CE outcomes, and
- Maintaining a culture that values learning, creativity and innovation.

These tasks form the foundation of Evidence-Based Leadership and Evidence-Based Management, and lead to an Evidence-Based Organization.

Resources

- National Council on Independent Living homepage
- Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC)'s The Essential Elements of Customized Employment homepage
- The ODEP Customized Employment Competency Model
- WINTAC's Pre-Employment Transition Services webpage
- Independent Living Research Utilization (ILRU)'s resource, Expanding CIL Capacity Through Youth Driven Transition Services

---

[4] Butterworth J., Gandolfo C., Revell G., Inge K. *A Mentor Guide to Increase Customized Employment Outcomes,* Training and Technical Assistance to Providers (T-TAP), 2007.