

CUSTOMIZED JOB DEVELOPMENT: TACTICS FOR TOUGH TIMES

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Introduction

In his latest book, Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell determines that successful careers depend on two fundamental elements:

1. Starting out in a supportive environment, and
2. Acquiring skills through repeated application and refinement

Gladwell notes that Microsoft CEO Bill Gates grew up in a family that supported continuous learning, and he had easy access to some of the first computers in the country where he could practice and learn. The Beatles landed their first real work in the strip clubs of Berlin where they had to perform grueling 8-hour shifts. Playing ceaselessly for years made them incredibly good musicians. For our purposes, the lesson here is that interests are important, but that skills mastery determines an individual's degree of success.

Recent employment practices, based in person-centered planning, have not proven overly successful. The focus of many person-centered approaches is the listing and cultivation of interests. However, interests devoid of related skills makes meaningful and lasting employment a tough goal to achieve.

It is true that strong interests motivate learning, but past assessment approaches reveal serious weaknesses in eliciting unique personal desires. Typical among the interests listed for people are: animals, coffee drinking, music, movies, etc. These are bland at best, and certainly universal likes among human beings. The Discovery process, however, illuminates interests, accompanying tasks, and skills that have specific application in businesses.

While several groups have proprietary Discovery processes (e.g. Griffin-Hammis Associates, Marc Gold Associates, The Rural Institute, et al.) all share the premise that employment derives from the creation of profit, and profit is generated by producing goods or services of value to customers, and production requires the performance of skills-based tasks. Again, while interests may help us find a career direction, instruction, application of skills, and mastery play an often-overlooked role in securing solid employment.

Steps to Discovering Personal Genius

Discovery stages the job development efforts to follow by answering some basic questions about the job seeker. The process typically begins where the individual lives, with listening sessions with friends and family where professionals should maintain silence except when prompting conversation. We recommend a simple: "tell me about your son," when doing the initial home visit with a family. This discussion is not an interview or interrogation; there's no checklist or script. The conversation goes where it needs to go and is not interrupted until all that needs to be said has been spoken. Generally there is time for follow up and clarification. Some rules for conducting Discovery include:

1. **Start with the person's home and those he or she is closest to.** Explore the rooms of the home for clues about interests, skills and tasks performed. Explore competency levels as well as the surrounding neighborhood for employment or work-experience opportunities, transportation resources, and places to learn new skills.
2. **Don't simply go to places of interest; participate.** In other words, plan activities that demonstrate the skills and tasks the individual can perform, wants to learn, and has an interest in learning.
3. **Seek to establish at least three over-riding vocational themes in the individual's life.** These are not job descriptions, such as "wants to refuel airplanes." Instead, think more broadly; in this case think aviation. This leads to a richer series of activities in relevant environments. Someone interested in refueling airplanes may simply be grasping at the one job they've seen or that

someone has told them they might be able to do. By exploring the broader field of aviation, using both Informational Interviews and short work-experiences, a world of possible tasks and environments is opened.

4. **Develop a solid profile statement capturing the essence of the person**, their predominant skills, and the three areas of vocational relevance.
5. **Make Discovery a project**. That is, manage it with a start and finish date. Customized Employment is not about getting a dream job. CE sees a job as the beginning of the rehabilitation process, not the end. Therefore, starting with a job that matches existing or quickly learned skills, in an environment that matches the individual's profile is the target for now. We are finding that precise focus on an individual by a team should result in adequate Discovery that takes 20 to 60 hours over an 8-week period.

Job Development

Searching for work begins as Discovery ends. Some rules for this economy that utilize the CE approach include:

1. **CE relies on negotiated job tasks that mutually benefit the employee and the employer**. By approaching specific employers who have task needs matching the job seeker's talents, a match is more easily determined.
2. **Understand that employers are always hiring!** They are hiring people who fit their company and who can generate their paychecks through profits.
3. **If filling out applications and going through interviews is anything more than a formality to make Human Resources happy, then it's not customized**. CE circumvents these traditional comparative processes that screen people with disabilities out. There is nothing inherently bad about these processes for people who can survive them; but many people with disabilities are immediately screened out. Again, CE is based on negotiation, not the traditional employment process.
4. **For each of the three vocational themes, construct a non-duplicative list of Twenty Places where the career makes sense**. In other words, list 20 specific places of employment in the community, accessible to the person, where people with similar skills and interests work. There is nothing magical about the number 20, but 5 or 10 is just too easy, and creativity in employment, along with complexity, comes after the obvious employers are listed.
5. **Use Informational Interviews to gather advice for the individual's career plan**. By asking for advice, and a tour of the company, the tasks are revealed and if a match seems possible, job development can be introduced. Informational interviews should not be used as a bait and switch technique, but they often reveal needs employers have as well as opportunities for a business-within-a-business. Also, Resource Ownership possibilities can be determined through the informational interviewing process, wherein the individual brings specific tools or technology with them that make them more employable, in the same way a college grad brings their diploma or a mechanic brings their tools to a job.
6. **Stay away from retail**. In this economy, retail is tough. And, regardless, retail has been stripped of much of its complexity. Complexity in work tasks often means more stable work, an abundance of natural supports via co-workers and equipment or technology, and higher earnings potential. Of course, it also means more rigorous use of systematic instruction by Employment Specialists.
7. **Seek out small businesses**. There are only 17,000 businesses in the United States with more than 500 employees. There are approximately 26 million small businesses, with an average of fewer than 4 employees, the majority of which have no Human Resources Department or even job descriptions. Fewer barriers to employment, means easier negotiations.
8. **People come together over shared interests**. Therefore, having an opportunity to meet with a small business manager or owner who shares the interests of the job seeker make the negotiation easier. As noted of course, interests are not enough, there must also be the potential for learning the requisite skills of the job, but the presence of shared interests is the foundation of all human relationships. And, employment is as much a personal relationship as marriage.
9. **There are unlimited ways to make a living in the world**; therefore, thinking in terms of job descriptions and job openings is pointless. Most of us only knew the 5 or 6 job descriptions

promoted by our Guidance Counselor: teacher, nurse, firefighter, police officer, and lawyer. For people with disabilities that list became: janitor, dishwasher, paper shredder, grocery bagger, and recycler. CE represents an unrestrained economic development approach to infinite job creation and restructuring. Negotiate with employers while highlighting skills that match their customers' needs instead of looking for stereotypical openings.

Conclusion

It's a tough employment market out there right now. But then, it's always been tough for people with disabilities. Go where the career makes sense, emphasize tasks and skills, and negotiate for mutual benefit.

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